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YOUNG WOMEN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH FEMINISM IN A  
POSTFEMINIST AND NEOLIBERAL CULTURAL CONTEXT

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Leeds  
Beckett University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

April 2018

**Rebecca Wray**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Young Women's engagement with feminism in a postfeminist and neoliberal cultural context**

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis aims to explore young women's relationship with feminism against the backdrop of a long-running media claim that 'feminism is dead' from a feminist-influenced poststructuralist perspective. Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2004) note how young women tend to be constructed in three specific ways: 1) as repudiating a feminist subjectivity, 2) as apolitical and apathetic, and 3) as interpreting the world through an individualistic lens. I agree with theirs and Griffin's (2001) sentiment that many assumptions have been made about young women's relationships with feminism.

I sought to build on previous research by conducting three studies. Study 1 and Study 2 were both media-text studies which investigated contemporary discourses relating to gender and feminism which are made available in (S1) women's monthly magazines and (S2) online feminist blogs. Study 3 used mini-focus groups with young women aged 18-30 years, in order to examine how discourses around feminism are co-constructed, as well as to identify which discourses from media (specifically women's magazines and feminist blogs) women reproduced and/or challenged in their talk. A feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis was used to analyse each dataset.

This research identifies not only a strong underlying core of individualism running throughout participants' talk (and operating across both media datasets), but also participants frequently repudiated terms such as 'feminism' and 'women's rights' and instead positioned themselves as 'equal rights advocate'. While participants deployed a discourse of gender neutrality to advocate a degendering of women's rights issues to being 'human rights', participants were deploying this discourse to suggest that men 'have it bad too'.

Many participants seemed to prefer to look at equality issues through a gender-neutral lens, and some participants felt unable to adopt a feminist subjectivity due to its perceived 'exclusion' of men. A feminist subjectivity was constructed by participants as passive and dependent. Instead, participants appeared to adopt the (apparently) active subject position of the 'can-do girl', who has individual agency and does not need to rely on support from the state, nor have any need for involvement in collective action such as feminist politics.

## **DECLARATION**

I confirm that the thesis is my own work; and that all published or other sources of material consulted have been acknowledged in notes to the text or the bibliography.

I confirm that the thesis has not been submitted for a comparable academic award.

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## **CHAPTER 1 - PROLOGUE TO THE THESIS**

### **1.1 Introduction**

#### *1.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the thesis as a whole, including a summary of the topic under study, the focus of the research undertaken for this thesis, and its overall position in the field of gender studies and feminist psychology.

This chapter will begin by setting the scene for the chosen research topic of contemporary young women in the UK. This will involve providing an overview of debates concerning the state of feminism beginning in the 1980s, through to the present (mid-2010s). A brief discussion of relevant literature will be presented to provide the reader with an understanding of different perspectives on the current state of the feminist movement, along with differing views on young women and their (dis)identification with feminism. This will be followed by a provision of contextual information in regards to theoretical concepts used in this thesis (including postfeminism, neoliberalism, and individualisation). The final section of this chapter will comprise of an outline of the thesis structure.

### **1.2 Overview of the PhD Research**

#### *1.2.1 Setting the Scene*

For the past three decades, there has been ongoing debate among feminists over how much resistance feminism faces from young women and why, with the label of feminism becoming increasingly repudiated (McRobbie, 2009; Redfern & Aune, 2010; Scharff, 2012). Faludi (1993) illustrates how the 1980s marked the beginning of a 'backlash' against feminism from popular culture and the mass media. As part of this backlash, both the media and popular culture alternately and simultaneously promulgated messages that feminism is outdated and no longer relevant to young women; that feminism has 'gone too far' and now it is

'poor boys' who are suffering and need help; and that feminism is the cause of various ills afflicting women such as stress, burnout, and infertility.

Of particular interest to this thesis is the notion that seems to have captured the imagination of the media across the last 30 years or so, the idea that 'feminism is dead'. This notion of feminism's death has appeared in news headlines since the late 1980s/early 1990s, and was still appearing in news articles in the 2000s and 2010s. When I first wrote the proposal for this PhD, I found the media's conceit that feminism does not appeal to young women in twenty-first century Britain to be curious and concerning at the same time. While women have come a long way over the course of the twentieth century in terms of rights and changing attitudes towards women's roles, there are still areas of women's lives which need to be improved. For example, the pay gap between full-time employed men and women is 13.9% (Fawcett Society, 2016). Women are also more likely than men to stay in the home in order to care for their children and/or sick/elderly relatives (Ben-Galim and Silim, 2013). In turn, this can lead to women being more likely to take up part-time employment, which is typically lower-paid and lower-status, or taking time out from employment altogether. The impact of caring responsibilities on the pay gap are further compounded when women return to employment from a career break to find their male colleagues have been promoted ahead of them (Fawcett Society, 2016). As reported by Ben-Galim and Silim (2013), a consequence of women having primary responsibility for caring is their under-representation in influential and senior positions in the spheres of business, politics and media. For example, only 29% of Members of Parliament in the UK are women (UK Political Info, Date Unknown).

I was also concerned by the way women around me appeared reluctant to identify with feminism or even reviled it, despite there still being women's rights issues which need addressing in the UK. I was curious over why UK women (even when they believe in gender equality) distance themselves from feminism, as epitomised by the statement "I'm not a feminist but...". What underpinned the initial planning and proposal stages of this research project was my curiosity over young women's (dis)identification with feminism. I wanted to go deeper into exploring this issue than the usual 'tick-box' approach of quantitative surveys. I was more interested in how women drew upon discourses to construct feminism and the way they positioned themselves in relation to feminism, so therefore I

decided to study this topic using a more critical approach underpinned by social constructionism.

Since I first began this research in 2009, there have been several surveys polling young women's relationship with feminism, such as those by online parenting networks Netmums (2012) and Mumsnet (2013) and the Girl Guiding UK survey (2015). As well as this there have been attempts made by glossy women's magazines (such as *ELLE* and *Stylist*) at 'rebranding' feminism to make it more appealing and palatable to young women. This is all despite there being feminist activity and campaigns involving young women having emerged in the 2000s such as UK Feminista, the London Feminist Network, Object, the Everyday Sexism project, and the Reclaim the Night marches. Not only does this debate seem to come and go in a circular fashion, there does appear to be a disconnect between the media's view that young women are not interested in feminism and the young feminists who contend that feminism is thriving and vibrant again. Indeed, Dean (2010) delineated how there have been two parallel narratives of the feminist movement from the 1990s through to the 2010s, one which is more pessimistic and melancholic, and another which is more optimistic and celebratory. Those who draw upon the pessimistic narrative mourn the declining visibility of the women's movement or express concerns that feminism has become fragmented and is no longer a coherent, unified movement (e.g. McRobbie, 2000). There are also feminist writers (e.g. Greer, 1999; McRobbie, 2009) who bemoan young women's repudiation of feminism. Some feminists (e.g. Kiraly and Tyler, 2015) have expressed concern that more liberal branches of feminism (referred to variously as consumer feminism, choice feminism, 'feminism-lite' and 'fun feminism') place too much emphasis on the rights of individual women to make their own choices. They argue that this has led to deradicalisation and depoliticisation of feminism with a reduced focus on collective solutions and structural inequalities.

In parallel with this pessimistic view of the current state of feminism, other feminists argue that rather than being in decline, feminism is now in its fourth wave and that there is a growing resurgence in feminist activism because of young women engaging with feminist debates and ideas (Redfern & Aune, 2010; Banyard, 2010). Some feminists believe that young women do not identify with the feminism of the '70s and '80s and therefore a new feminist movement would

need to find its own style, agenda and means of creating women's autonomy. For instance, both Attwood (2007) and Rubin and Nemeroff (2001) argue that young women are creating their own feminist agenda which simultaneously overlaps with second wave feminism, while also departing from it. They argue that young feminists aim to disrupt, confuse, and celebrate categories of gender and sexuality through diverse means such as displaying alternate images of beauty (e.g. fluorescent hair, body piercings, and tattoos) or through participating in 'altporn' websites such as *Suicide Girls* and *Nerve*.

Certainly, from my own reading around the subject, I have to concur with Dean (2010) that discussions over the current state of feminism tend to fall into a particular narrative, which I argue is oversimplistic and overlooks the complexity of the feminist movement from the early 1990s to the present day. This very complexity is something I aim to address in this thesis. In chapter 2, I will attempt to 'untangle' the different narratives and debates about the status of feminism; while in chapter 3, I will explore previous academic research on young women's relationship with feminism.

### **1.3 Background context and theory**

Before moving on to the main part of this thesis which focuses on the research project, I feel it is important to provide some contextual information for the reader in regards to theoretical concepts and terminology used in this thesis. Specifically, in regards to 'gender', 'feminism', 'postfeminism', 'neoliberalism', 'individualism', and 'individualisation'.

#### *1.3.1 Feminist poststructuralism, gender and intersectionality*

In a nutshell, feminism is underpinned by the notion that society does not treat women fairly and so it is the role of feminism to try to understand why this is the case and how specifically women are oppressed (Magezis, 1996), as well as to agitate for social change (Scholz, 2010). Scholz (2010) suggests that all schools of feminist thought begin with a common assumption, that women are oppressed, though there are differences in how this oppression is understood by different

schools of thought, as well as the strategies proposed to overcome it. As noted by Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001), it is not a simple task to write an overview of feminism due in part to how it had become so diversified by the late 1990s. Feminism means different things to different women and can be described as a broad social movement allowing different points of view to develop under this umbrella (Magezis, 1996). The variety of branches and dialects of feminism which have developed over the years complicates the unpicking of issues which feminists are interested in addressing, challenging and discussing. Additionally, it is no longer possible to discuss a 'feminist analysis' or 'feminist perspective' of many issues due to different branches of feminism taking up different theoretical positions in debates (such as in regards to pornography) (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 2001). Following on from this, different schools of feminist thought can differ in terms of how they define 'gender' and the category of 'woman', including whether the category exists at all (Scholz, 2010). Fine (2017) outlines how the term 'gender' began to be used from the late 1970s as a way to draw distinction between biological sex, and feminine/masculine attributes, as well as the status that society ascribes to being fe/male. Fine explains that when someone uses the term 'gender', they are highlighting the role of social constructions around gender, as well as the disparities created between women and men. Social scientists such as Ann Oakley (1972) distinguished between biological 'sex' and socialised 'gender'. This usage of 'gender' was making reference to 'stable' differences between men and women which were informed by cultural learning (rather than being based in biology). However, Fine (2017) points out how the term 'gender' in common usage today (since the 1980s) tends to be used interchangeably with 'sex' to refer to a person's biological sex (e.g. application forms asking applicants to identify their 'gender' as male or female). To counteract this, Fine describes how some feminist scientists have taken to using terms like 'sex/gender' and 'gender/sex' in order to emphasise that when studying sex differences: "you are always looking at the product of an inextricable mix of biological sex and social gender constructions" (p. 26). Fine argues that while this makes good sense, it does not make for smooth reading. Similarly, I do not feel this is particularly clear and so will now clarify to the reader the position I have taken in regards to terminology used.

To clarify, in regards to Study 3, when conducting the mini-focus groups with young women, I did not impose or put forward a particular definition of feminism

or gender. Instead, I provided a non-judgemental space for my participants to construct these two concepts together. This is because I was interested in how women understand these two terms and interpret their meanings. Regardless, this thesis is informed by a particular feminist perspective – that is, feminist poststructuralism. Feminist poststructuralism refers to feminist theory and research which engages with poststructuralist work and ideas (such as the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida). Some feminists such as Judith Butler are often grouped in with feminist poststructuralism, but Butler (1990) rejects the label as ‘too inclusive’. Butler also expresses concern that the label ‘feminist poststructuralism’ risks feminists falling into creating a ‘grand theory’ of its own which is something poststructuralists reject and challenge. However, I will use this label as I feel it best describes where my own work is aligned. As Gavey (1989) explains, poststructuralism is a loose collection of theoretical positions, rather than one big ‘grand theory’ as Butler was concerned it would become. Indeed, as Frost and Elichao (2014) point out, feminist poststructuralism tends to be criticised for the lack of a unifying philosophy.

In the mid-1980s, feminist poststructuralists began to critique the tendency of feminists to rely upon sexual difference as *the* most important analytical category, as this suggests a reliance on essentialist categories of gender which are both totalising and unifying, a reliance which typically marks modernist thought (Whelehan, 1995). Indeed, Featherstone (1988) even argued that feminism was one of the flawed ‘grand narratives’ of modernity. In postmodernism, ‘grand theory’ or ‘grand narratives’ are viewed as potentially tyrannical and universalising. This means that in feminist poststructuralist thinking, the unified category of ‘woman’ as subject is displaced, due to the category being too homogenising and unitary to be accommodated within postmodern notions of subjectivity (Whelehan, 1995). Butler (1990) believes notions around gender are informed by a binary framework, and therefore gender only holds currency within a heterosexual worldview. Butler sees gender signifiers as being fluid, rather than static and stable.

What I feel is a key part of feminist poststructuralism in terms of how it informs my work, is the importance of not accepting notions of universality of difference, as well as arbitrary and artificial binary categorisations (e.g. ‘man’ and ‘woman’). This is because I see such categorisations as being based on cultural and



societal assumptions. From this perspective, such categories (as 'woman') can be deconstructed in order to explore how language serves to create and reinforce essentialist notions of women as 'different from men' (Frost and Elichaooff, 2014). As my research is informed by feminist poststructuralism, I consider it important to recognise how the specificity of context can influence and shape a multiplicity of realities. Feminists adopting a feminist poststructuralist approach are focused on highlighting the variations of women's lives and subjectivities and are interested in how these are shaped and perceived by women and by others.

Poststructuralism is underpinned by a rejection of any notion of an 'absolute truth' or single 'reality' which is what modernist claims are based upon. As this informs my perspective, this means I do not view 'woman' as a category which is fixed, stable and unchanging. Nor do I view sexual difference as being innate, but rather an effect of social and historical relations of power. My work aligns with the feminist poststructuralist belief that theorising 'gender' based on claims of essentialism is unsatisfactory. Similarly, I hold the position that experiences are neither unified nor universal, and instead reflect a person's relationship to other dimensions such as ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability. In order to make sense of themselves and the world they inhabit, women are seen in feminist poststructuralism to draw upon cultural, historical, personal and political constructs (Frost and Elichaooff, 2014). Social constructions around gender can and will shape the situations a woman or a man encounters, as well as their subjective meaning (Fine, 2017). These meanings constantly shift within different social, cultural, political, and historical locations (Whelehan, 1995).

Before moving onto a discussion of the concept of 'postfeminism', I will now discuss the concept of intersectionality and my position on this. Staunaes (2003) notes how in the late twentieth century there has been much academic feminist discussion on decentring and pluralising categories of gender and woman, via examination of other intersecting categories (e.g. nationality, age, sexual orientation) and how these shape or constitute women. The debate on intersectionality grew in the 1970s and 1980s when the concept of a 'global sisterhood' was critiqued as at the time feminism was seen as failing to take on board the power divisions between women (such as due to differences in ethnicity or class) and the women's movement's treatment of the concept of 'woman' as homogenous and universal in nature (Brah and Phoenix, 2004). Even

during the 1970s this was not a new issue, as in the nineteenth century feminists involved in both the anti-slavery and suffrage campaigns also foregrounded the issue. While the first women's anti-slavery society was formed by African-American women in Salem, Massachusetts in the USA, African-American women were conspicuous due to their absence from the Seneca Falls Anti-Slavery Convention in 1848. Here, it was mainly white, middle-class delegates who debated women's suffrage. Years later in 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered her speech *Ain't I a Woman?* at the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in which she deconstructed the major truth claims of the time. Truth did this by challenging the essentialist thinking demonstrated by male members of the audience that women were weaker than men (i.e. that women need help getting in and out of carriages) or that enslaved black women were not real women (i.e. her grief at seeing her children sold into slavery). Since this moment in history, feminists have continued to argue the case for intersectional analysis. One such example is black lesbian feminist group the Combahee River Collective in Boston, who in 1977 contested the notion of privileging a single dimension of experience as though that one dimension constitutes the whole of a person. They argued for a more integrated analysis underpinned by the notion that major systems of oppression are interlocking and are simultaneously local and global in nature (Brah and Phoenix, 2004).

According to Brah and Phoenix (2004), a key feature of intersectional analysis is a concern with 'decentring' of the 'normative subject' of feminism. They note that the concept of interlocking oppressions was one of the earliest formulations of the 'decentred subject'. Brah and Phoenix (2004) argue that the need for understanding intersections of different axis of differentiation remains important in the early twenty-first century due to the complexities intersections pose. Similarly, Staunaes (2003) asserts that the concept of intersectionality is at the forefront of feminism. I agree with their claim that the question of what it means to be a woman under different historical circumstances is of enduring importance and relevance to feminism. As my work is informed by feminist poststructuralist ideas, I believe that it is important to challenge notions of 'woman' which are essentialist and ahistoric. Brah and Phoenix (2004) consider the concept of intersectionality as one which signifies:

the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis (sic) of differentiation – economic, political,

cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts.  
(p. 76).

To draw upon intersectional analysis in feminist work means to recognise that different dimensions of social life (such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, among others) cannot be separated out into discrete strands. Staunaes (2003) explains that intersectional analysis is interested in questions regarding how gender is intertwined with processes of multiculturalism, and how gender intersects with other categories within lived contexts. Staunaes argues that the concept of intersectionality can be a useful analytical tool. She suggests that it can be used to trace how certain people get positioned not only as being different, or even as marginalised, but also as ‘troubled’.

Staunaes (2003) describes how in the fields of standpoint feminism and critical race theory, there has been a tendency towards feminists fixing categories and identities, and using these in ideologically informed ways. She concedes that fixing categories can be useful when working in and against a system which is built upon the privileges of certain fixed identities as this can help create group solidarity and mobilisation. However, Staunaes contends that in order to handle the complexity of lived experiences and understand meaning-making processes, additional analytical tools are required. She therefore argues for the reconceptualisation of intersectionality by shifting the focus from identity politics to lived experiences. As part of her reconceptualisation, Staunaes builds in a non-additional approach whereby categories are not simply ‘added up’ but treated as mutually interlocking concepts. This goes beyond ‘additive’ models of oppression whereby categories are simply stacked up on top of one another, and instead looks into how subjectivities are constructed through intersections of multiple dimensions and how categories intermingle. Social categories do not intermingle equally, nor is there a predetermined hierarchical pattern between the categories (e.g. gender first, then ethnicity).

In her reconceptualisation of intersectionality, Staunaes (2003) draws upon the poststructuralist and social constructionist premises of social categories, subjectification, subject positions, and troubled subject positions. Rather than using the concept of identity, poststructuralists use the concept of subjectivity to refer to a person’s sense of self. Unlike identity, subjectivity can grasp stability, change, and rupture and treats the self as an ongoing process of becoming.

Subjectification, in the Foucauldian sense, views the human actor as a subject who is both acting upon contextual conditions *and* being subject to contextual conditions. Poststructuralist researchers studying subjectification need to be sensitive towards the processes whereby people take up, resist, or even ignore discourses. Social categories are part of subjectivities and subject positions. Social categories tend to be understood as static and stable variables which people have (Staunaes, 2003). Feminist poststructuralists such as Butler (1990) have challenged this view, arguing that social categories are not an essential variable you are or have, but is something you do and become. Here, social categories are constructed in daily interactions between actors, and in relation to other doings, are done, undone and redone. Social categories are tools of selecting and ordering, positioning and creating hierarchies. Power clusters around certain categories and not others (Staunaes, 2003). However, as Staunaes (2003) stresses, it is important to remember that social categories do not only count for those who are 'Other' (i.e. the non-powerful, the non-privileged, the marginalised minority), but also count for those who are privileged and powerful. The powerful and the majority are also shaped by experiences which are framed by social categories. Indeed, research by Dottolo and Stewart (2013) demonstrates how ethnicity is often assumed to be a social category which only 'belongs' to minorities and/or people of colour. 'Whiteness' is seen as a 'natural' or default identity and so it goes unnoticed, taken for granted, and even hidden. Dottolo and Stewart suggest this could be partly because ethnicity is always defined in relational terms. This resonates with reflections by Crafter (2011) who talked about her coming to terms with how she spent a significant part of her life viewing herself as 'colourless' and cultureless. Crafter reflects on how in an interview with three South Asian Learning Support Assistants, she was positioning 'them' in relation to herself and was reifying difference. Staunaes (2003) advocates a Foucauldian majority-inclusive approach when conducting intersectional analysis. This focuses on *how* a person becomes un/marked and how these processes are produced, sustained and subverted. To Staunaes (2003) what is crucial here is that it is an analytical move away from the exotic spectacle of the 'Other'. I will be drawing upon Staunaes's interlocking and majority-inclusive approach when reflecting on the findings of this thesis in chapter 9.

### 1.3.2 Postfeminism

According to Gill (2007b), postfeminism has become one of the most important and contested terms in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis. She highlights how there is little consensus on exactly what postfeminism is, while Gamble (2001a) refers to the term as holding an “infinitely flexible media definition” (p. 43). As the term became part of the popular lexicon, it was considered controversial due to how the word had been popularly interpreted as suggesting society had moved beyond the need for the feminist movement (Gamble, 2001b). As a consequence, second wave feminists attacked the concept of ‘postfeminism’: “as a betrayal of more than a century of feminist activism” (Gamble, 2001b, p. viii). Gamble explains how this debate was still vociferous at the turn of the century and suggested it was being ‘stoked’ by a media hoping to capitalise on a portrayal of feminism as fragmented and marked by in-fighting. She proposes that it is the semantic uncertainty generated by the prefix (‘post’-) which causes confusion. Gamble cites the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition of ‘post’- as “after in time or order” (p. 44) and not as about rejection. Despite this, the term ‘postfeminism’ is still argued to constitute a rejection of feminism (Gamble, 2001a).

Gill and Scharff (2011) refer to ‘postfeminism’ as a term with ‘taken-for-granted status’ which belies contestations and debate over its meaning. They suggest postfeminism is a term used with a lack of specificity and yet also to signal a wide range of meanings. Indeed, it is even suggested that some feminists are wary of the term and are unable to decide whether it is a valid movement and/or phenomenon or simply an invention of the media (Gamble, 2001b). Gamble (2001b) believes this wariness and distrust is due to the lack of clarity as to what the concept ‘postfeminism’ constitutes. Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995) note how the term has never been defined and suggest that it: “remains the product of assumption” (p. 4). It is also a term that appears to not be claimed by anyone, but rather a label which is applied to women by others (Gamble, 2001a). Barrett (2000) suggests there are two meanings of ‘postfeminism’. One is a popular meaning that feminist politics have been succeeded by a new phenomenon often referred to as ‘girl power’. The other is an academic meaning which is based on the idea that feminist theory has been transformed through the incorporation of poststructuralist ideas. Gill and Scharff (2011) go further than this

and identify the term 'postfeminism' as being used in four different ways: 1) postfeminism as postmodern feminism; 2) postfeminism as signifying that feminism is now redundant; 3) postfeminism as backlash; and 4) postfeminism as a sensibility; each of which are outlined below in greater detail. Due to the lack of consensus on how to define postfeminism, I will now explore the different usages of this term as identified by Gill and Scharff (2011).

Firstly, the term postfeminism can be used to signal an epistemological break within feminism (Gill & Scharff, 2011). It can mark the intersection of feminism with other anti-foundationalist movements such as postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism. In this first usage, 'post' can imply transformation and change within feminism and can be understood as an analytical perspective or theoretical orientation. Here, there is a focus on the destabilisation of fixed definitions of gender, the deconstruction of authoritative paradigms and practices, as well as an emphasis on the fluid and multiple nature of subjectivity (Gamble, 2001b). According to Brooks (1997), postfeminism emerged as a result of critiques found both within and outside feminism and involved an unsettling of the intellectual discipline of feminism. Brooks suggests a paradigm shift from feminism to postfeminism can be seen in three directions: 1) in challenges to feminism's epistemological foundationalism; 2) in a shift away from specific disciplinary boundaries; and 3) in a refusal to be limited by representational constraints (p. 210). Brooks contends that feminist poststructuralism is a significant advance over second wave feminism, due to how cultural and historical specificity in the experiences of women are addressed.

Gamble (2001a) proposes that this is possibly the most 'convincing' usage of the term due to its inherently theoretical nature (by this Gamble suggests the term is more a paper-bound ideology than anything that can be concretely identified). With this comes the suggestion that 'postfeminism' could be a pluralistic epistemology which is focused on disrupting universalising patterns of thought and destabilising the notion of both the autonomous subject and separate, oppositional categories (i.e. 'woman' and 'man'). Under this usage, Brooks (1997) deliberates that 'postfeminism' may become accepted in time as a successor to second wave feminism due to its role in shaping and establishing intellectual debate and representing conceptual and theoretical diversity.

Secondly, postfeminism can be used to refer to an historical shift which takes place after the peak of second wave feminism. In this form, postfeminism is based upon the assumption of feminism's 'pastness'. This 'pastness' of feminism can be variously celebrated, mourned or simply noted, particularly by the mass media (Tasker & Negra, 2007). The media laud over the notion of a 'postfeminist age' in which young women are ambitious, independent and successful, and also less likely to embrace feminist ideals (Whelehan, 1995). Gill and Scharff (2011) note that sometimes, particularly in the US, the term is used interchangeably with 'third wave feminism' to mark out a time after 'seventies' feminist activism, against which all other forms of feminist activism are judged and found wanting (Dean, 2010). The media, politics, and business alike promulgated messages that the 1990s was an 'enlightened' and 'postfeminist' period and that 'all' had been achieved (Copock, Haydon and Richter, 1995). Whelehan (1995) contends that it is "patently absurd that feminism could possibly have achieved its ends" (p. 222) when women still encounter inequality such as low-pay, under-representation in state politics and a greater likelihood to be living in poverty (than men). The expression of feminist ideas is considered to be passé, uncool and unfeminine (Faludi, 1993). Gamble (2001b) describes how media outlets promote the view that: "for most people, it appears, feminism remains something 'out there' rather than an internalised, actualised belief" (p. vii) via publicising surveys which claim to show that very few women identify with the feminist label. One such example was cited by Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995) as being written in *New York Times Magazine* (17<sup>th</sup> October, 1982) by Susan Bolotin. In this article, (titled: 'Voices from the post-feminist generation') when interviewing 18-25 year old women, Bolotin found that the women viewed feminism as a discredited politics, condemning and denouncing the potential of feminism for challenging inequality. Bolotin argued that the young women's rejection of feminist politics and theory indicated the arrival of 'postfeminism'. Gamble (2001a) however, cautions that there is a danger in being too optimistic in regards to assuming the time for feminism is in the past based upon one's own position of privilege.

In this second usage, feminism tends to not only be positioned as irrelevant to young women's lives, but is also presented as tyrannical, prudish and stuffy. This can be seen in media claims that: "feminism spoiled women's fun, their right to be sexually attractive and dress up, to flirt and enjoy domestic bliss" (Whelehan,

1995, p. 221). Reinstating femininity, in particular a feminine presentation of self, is part of this postfeminism. It is this retention of femininity combined with both economic and social success which, within this conceptualisation of postfeminism, is framed as being desirable (Barrett, 2000). Tied in with this is the phenomenon of 'girl power'. The media frequently draws upon the concept of 'girl power' to proclaim in a variety of ways (e.g. at school) that 'girls are doing better', and usually this is framed as 'girls are doing better than boys' (Barrett, 2000). The origin of the term 'girl power' can be found in the early 1990s women's punk movement riotgrrl, where it was sometimes spelled as 'grrrl power'. As Fudge (2006) bemoans, co-optation of an underground/subcultural movement is nothing new and 'girl power' was adopted as a slogan in 1996 by pop group the Spice Girls. The Spice Girls never really defined what they meant by 'girl power', with Fudge suggesting it can be summed up as "be yourself" and "kick some undefined ass" (p. 156). Fudge discusses how the media latched onto the visual elements of riotgrrl, in particular sartorial expression whereby punk fashion would be combined with 'girly' imagery such as baby doll dresses and *Hello Kitty* hair clips. In the riotgrrl movement, such fashion was conceived as "girlhood gone angry" (p. 158), but media outlets which reported on this imagery, only focused on the superficial elements and failed to see any of the underlying commentary. This then led on to the media labelling any celebrity displaying 'spunky femaleness' as girl power (Avril Lavigne is one such example).

Germaine Greer (1999) criticises postfeminism as being depoliticised and no more than a 'market-led phenomenon'. Women are assured by postfeminism that they can 'have it all', while reinstating them as consumers, while multi-national corporations are located in a position of power. Similarly, Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995) also argue that successive governments through the 1980s and 1990s have created a 'consumer culture' rather than creating a level playing field of equal opportunity. They argue that claims of a 'postfeminist age' in which equality has been achieved cannot be sustained in the face of statistical evidence demonstrating that progress towards equality for women has been rather fragile and uneven. Likewise, in relation to girl power, Fudge (2006) argues that it is not a bad thing for girls to be brought up being told they are "naturally powerful" (p. 160), but if these girls encounter any sexism when they grow older, they will not have the tools to challenge or critique it. Certainly I see this as a problem with this postfeminist discourse. Like Fudge, I am concerned that postfeminism shifts



attention away from collective action and activism and towards individual achievement and personal choice. Greer (1999) also makes the point that the adoption of a postfeminist stance is a luxury only those living in the affluent Western world can indulge in. Further, she puts forward that this is achieved by ignoring how through exercising one's freedom, a woman may be reinforcing another woman's oppression. Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995) also argue that the concept of postfeminism is more relevant to professional women as it is women in privileged positions who arguably have more choices available to them (such as in regards to motherhood and/or a career). They argue that options which are available to middle-class, able-bodied, straight, white women are often not available to other women.

Thirdly, postfeminism has been used to refer to a backlash against feminism. According to Gill and Scharff (2011), backlash discourses can work in many contradictory ways such as by claiming the 'war is won' while also suggesting that feminism makes women unhappy and that 'you can't have it all'. It can also be characterised by claims that 'political correctness' is a new form of tyranny (and of course 'going too far') and that it is (white) men who are the 'real victims' (Faludi, 1993). Whelehan (1995) notes how the media simultaneously proclaim the achievement of equality between men and women, and declare all the 'ills', 'stresses' and 'strains' caused by feminism. Said 'ills' are taken by the media as 'proof' that women are incapable of handling equality with men. As I will touch upon in greater detail in chapter 2, the media (in particular newspapers) exhort women to blame feminism for any exhaustion and disillusionment they may feel, while obscuring any root in political and/or societal structures. Feminism has also been blamed (both directly and indirectly) by backlash for violence against women. Whelehan (1995) describes how proponents of backlash discourse cajole women into believing that freedom of choice and opportunity to succeed comes at the expense of a happy and fulfilled life. Naomi Wolf (1990) also responded to the backlash against feminism, by developing the concept of the 'beauty myth'. The 'beauty myth' involves the use of images of 'feminine' beauty as a political weapon against the advancement of women. Wolf believes the beauty industry in the early 1990s was a new form of patriarchal control, whereby women were compelled to see their bodies as 'unfinished' and therefore requiring constant work (such as cosmetic surgery). However, Wolf also curiously absolved men of any blame in relation to this, despite that the heads of beauty companies

tend to be men (Whelehan, 1995). Instead, Wolf (1990) deconstructs the beauty industry and even 'reminds' her readers that men are also becoming 'victims' of 'the beauty myth'. This 'men as victims' narrative, tends to mark backlash discourse.

Whelehan (1995) describes how in the 1980s feminist ideas came to be distorted by New Right ideology. Proponents of New Right ideology identified themselves as both pro-female and pro-family, and positioned themselves as occupying a stance which recognises and endorses women's familial location (read: role as mothers). The pro-family stance is one which frames sexual politics and the politicisation of personal relationships as being a 'threat' to 'the family'. The New Right is also characterised by an affirmation of sex differences and traditionally 'feminine' qualities. Followers of the New Right also believe that the feminist movement detracts from 'more important' political issues (Stacey, 1986). According to Whelehan (1995), proponents of the 'feminism as detracting' narrative also tend to draw upon the notion of a 'postfeminist age' to suggest it is now time for the 'excesses' of second wave feminism (i.e. 'invading' the 'sanctity' of personal privacy) to be overturned and discarded in favour of 'healing' the family. Here, feminism has been represented as an anti-family movement and as a threat to the "'natural' way of life" (p. 223). Both women and men who express fear and resentment towards feminism, not only advocate a return to 'traditional' roles and attitudes, but also call for a resurgence of 'old values', the return to distinct roles for men and women, and the segregation between the public and private spheres. Here, independence and career success for women is rendered as incompatible with 'true happiness' which can 'only' be found within the 'natural' role of wife and mother. Unsurprisingly, there are those such as Overholser (1986) who contend that such a stance sounds more like 'prefeminism' and sexism than anything else (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter, 1995).

A related angle to this is in regards to 'political correctness' which is presented as being an 'obstacle' to 'freedom of expression'. This is an issue which Whelehan (1995) explains as being in swing in the early 1990s and which I would argue is still a problem now with the rise of Internet trolling, the backlash against female leads in film and television (e.g. *Doctor Who*, *Star Wars*, *Ghostbusters*) and the rise of right-wing politics (exemplified by the UK voting to leave the European Union, and the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States – both

occurring in 2016). Faludi (1993) suggests that the backlash against women is not new, and that backlashes tend to be triggered by the perception of women making great gains in society (whether accurate or not). Proponents of backlash discourse often argue not only that equality has been achieved, but that it has been 'over-achieved, with the 'pendulum swinging the other way' towards favouring women over men (Coppock, Haydon, and Richter, 1995).

An interesting point put forward by Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995) is that 'backlash' as a concept may be irrelevant for most women. They query whether it is realistic to infer that women who are working-class, disabled, lesbian, trans, black, and/or older have experienced the same liberation as young, able-bodied, white, middle-class women. What they contend is that the 'backlash' is not against all women, and has instead been focused on women who have been in a position of privilege from which they could benefit from feminist gains. Gill and Scharff (2011) consider that the debates relating to the third usage of postfeminism (backlash) are valuable due to them attempting to discuss the normative or ideological content of postfeminist discourses, unlike the first and second usages. However, they believe the third usage is still not comprehensive enough. In all three usages Gill and Scharff contend that there is a lack of attention being paid to what is *new* in relation to contemporary depictions of gender. Gill and Scharff also argue that the elision of postfeminism with anti-feminism is too simplistic, and misses the 'entanglement' of feminist and anti-feminist ideas, which is what they believe to be a crucial feature of current media discourses. This entanglement is addressed in the fourth usage developed by Gill (2007b), referred to as 'postfeminism as a sensibility'.

Fourthly, postfeminism as a sensibility as proposed by Gill (2007b) is constituted by both a shift in the way women are represented from objectification to subjectification, and the notion of femininity being increasingly figured as bodily property. As well as this, the postfeminist sensibility incorporates neoliberal notions around self-surveillance, self-monitoring, individual responsibility, and an emphasis on consumerism and personal choice. According to Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995), postfeminism is underpinned by the principle that women can make personal choices about what they want to do (e.g. career, family, travel). This is exemplified by phrases such as 'women have made it', 'can have it all' and have the opportunity to 'make it' and 'go for them' [opportunities that is]. This

has led to subject positions such as 'superwoman', 'career-mother' and 'working girl' being made available to women and being taken as epitomising late modernity.

What marks this usage of postfeminism as different to the historical and backlash usages is that it does not simply elide postfeminism with anti-feminism, but rather sees postfeminism as incorporating feminist *and* anti-feminist ideas (McRobbie, 2004). McRobbie elucidates extensively in her work *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) the reasons why young women cannot overtly show support for feminism. McRobbie asserts that we are now living under a 'new gender regime'. She uses this to explain the multiple ways in which feminism has been incorporated into the mainstream and 'taken into account', and in turn this 'taking into account' of feminism allows it to be 'undone' through feminism being invoked as a movement or belief system which is no longer necessary. McRobbie refers to this as a 'double entanglement' and argues this facilitates both a 'doing' and 'undoing' of feminism. Through the postfeminist sensibility, young women are offered a particular kind of freedom, choice and empowerment either 'in exchange for' or 'as a kind of substitute for' feminist politics (McRobbie, 2009). In this usage, postfeminism is positioned as an object of critical analysis and becomes a term which can be used analytically. As McRobbie (2009) contends, young women are only able to come forward on the condition that feminism is left behind. In this context, McRobbie (2009) believes that the performative denunciations of feminism have consolidated into a form closer to repudiation and 'hatred' rather than ambivalence. This is because in order for young women in late modernity to be able to adopt a viable female subjectivity, they are required to adopt (neoliberal) notions of individualism, self-management and self-responsibility. The contradiction here is that, while young women's ability to become active, autonomous and independent in their own right is a result of second wave feminist work, feminism must still be denounced as it is constituted as being at odds with the individualised economic and sexual agency which is a requirement of being an intelligible feminine subject in late modernity. As suggested by Gamble (2001a), postfeminism is a position which is incapable of providing a space in which past feminist activism can be celebrated (and critiqued), simultaneously with new strategies being developed to improve women's position. Further to this, McRobbie (2009) proposes that notions of female individualisation, self-management and success function as a substitute for

feminism, so as to ensure the latter will not re-emerge as a movement. Coppock, Haydon, and Richter (1995) observe how young women are being pressurised by popular discourses telling them 'the world is their oyster', the implication of which is women who cannot achieve their goals, or even know what they want to begin with have only themselves to blame. In postfeminist discourse, failure is deemed to be caused by individual lack.

According to Gamble (2001a), at the heart of 'postfeminism' is a tautology, whereby it is a phenomenon occupying a space of limbo between the future (postfeminism as postmodernism) and the past (postfeminism as feminism is irrelevant and outmoded). She argues this means as a concept it is therefore more theoretical than actual. Barrett (2000) believes that whether it is called 'postfeminism' or something else (such as 'new feminism'), there is definitely a readily identifiable current of thought which is distinct from previous feminist thought, a current of thought which I would suggest could be characterised by the term 'girl power'. Indeed, in 1997 the Spice Girls exclaimed: "We can give feminism a kick up the arse. Women can be so powerful when they show solidarity" (quoted in Whelehan, 2000, p. 45), which I would argue appears to be distorting what feminism was and is about (certainly in regards to the Spice Girls' implication that feminism has never considered female solidarity before). As Fudge (2006) notes, the Spice Girls-associated phenomenon may have faded from the limelight, but the ethos of girl power remains and still forms part of dominant discourses around girls and equality. I agree with Fudge that girl power has greatly permeated popular culture and has been adopted as a marketing tool exemplified through phrases such as 'you go, girl!'. Fudge suggests that girl power arrived in a political climate growing more liberal (with the election of Bill Clinton in the US, and the election of Tony Blair in the UK), in which political gains appeared safe from erosion and lulled people into falsely assuming feminism was no longer needed.

To clarify my own positioning in regards to the usage of postfeminism, I will draw upon the four usages outlined by Gill and Scharff (2011). I would argue against using the term now in relation to the first usage which refers to shifts in feminist thought towards feminist poststructuralism and postmodern feminism. I would suggest this interpretation of postfeminism is at odds with the other three usages which I see as being linked together. The latter three usages appear to have no

links with postmodernist or poststructural thinking and ideas, nor refer to a mode of feminism engaged with critically thinking about gender and the position of women today. Therefore, I choose to demarcate this mode as separate from postfeminism by referring to them throughout this thesis as postmodern feminism and feminist poststructuralism. I find myself agreeing with Gill and Scharff (2011) and McRobbie (2009) that postfeminism is not simply anti-feminism, nor is it as simple as a backlash against women or simply 'feminism as out-of-date'. Rather than treating postfeminism as a theoretical orientation (as you could say, for instance feminist poststructuralism is), McRobbie instead treats postfeminism as an object of critical analysis, which Gill and Scharff (2011) argue is what is significant here. I agree with this sentiment; postfeminism is not a theoretical orientation, nor would it be right to refer to it as a movement. As Fudge (2006) points out, girl power is difficult to critique (and even define) because it is not a movement, and no one identifies themselves as an adherent of girl power. Similarly, Gamble (2001a) observes how postfeminist is a label applied by others to women, and not a label which is self-adopted. In this light, I consider it makes sense to treat postfeminism as an object of critical analysis. I propose that postfeminism is an object which incorporates the different elements highlighted by the second, third and fourth usages (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Namely that it incorporates a sensibility characterised by individualism, personal choice, consumerism, subjectification, self-surveillance, retrosexism (the resurgence of traditional, separate feminine and masculine roles), but also elements of McRobbie's double-entanglement (of acknowledging, but rejecting feminism), backlash, and girl power (notions around depoliticised personal empowerment, reclaiming femininity and individual aspirations and achievement).

### *1.3.3 Neoliberalism*

Neoliberalism, according to Harvey (2005), is a theory of political economic practices which proposes that liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework (characterised by free markets, free trade, and strong private property rights) is the best mode for advancing human wellbeing and social good. This theory posits that it is the role of the state to create and preserve an institutional framework which is conducive to free markets such as through the privatisation of domains which were not previously marketised (such

as transport, education, healthcare, water, gas and so on). However, this is strictly as far as state intervention should go. Once a market (e.g. of public transport) is created, state intervention must be kept minimal. This is due to the notion that powerful interest groups would inevitably bias and distort any state intervention towards their own personal interests.

In nineteenth century Britain, the dominant ideological framework was constituted by *laissez-faire*<sup>1</sup> and individualism, whereby social phenomena such as poverty were frequently attributed to fecklessness, individual failings and immorality. From this viewpoint, it was considered inappropriate for the state to intervene or ameliorate conditions relating to phenomena such as ill health or poverty (Dorey, 2005, p. 13). In contrast, the post-war period (1945-1979) was informed by a social democratic framework whereby it was considered appropriate that government could (and should) intervene in relation to the economy and employment. In direct contrast with the late Victorian period, it was accepted that the state had a responsibility to provide both health services and an education system which were (freely) available to everyone, as well as provide a public housing system and a welfare state (Dorey, 2005). Both Harvey (2005) and Dorey (2005) observe how since the late 1970s, a new dominant framework has prevailed: neoliberalism, and with it the notion of individualism; though Dorey notes that whether these ideas are actually new or simply revived ideas from the late Victorian period has been subject to debate. This new framework provided the foundation for ideas which were fundamentally different to that of social democracy particularly the primacy of the market economy and the reduction of state intervention. Initially, neoliberalism was considered as an extreme or atavistic ideology of interest only to those such as the New Right (Crines, 2014). However, as Crines (2014) outlines, neoliberalism became part of the political mainstream in the 1980s when then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advocated that the Conservative Party needed an ideology because 'the other side' (presumably the Labour Party) had one to test their policies against. Neoliberalism was the ideology adopted by the Conservatives in relation to the economic sphere, while moral absolutism and traditionalism continued to be their ideologies in relation to the spheres of social policy and sexual politics (Crines, 2014). Thatcher declared that there is "no such thing as society, only individual

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<sup>1</sup> *Laissez-faire* is a French term which translates as "let (it/them) do".

men and women” (quoted in Harvey, 2005, p. 23). Under Thatcher all forms of social solidarity were dissolved, while individualism, personal responsibility, and family values were encouraged.

Dorey (2005) points out how the framework of neoliberalism became so entrenched in the UK, that the Labour Party not only accepted neoliberalism and market economics, but embraced them as well (leading to the party rebranding itself as ‘New Labour’ in 1994). Harvey (2005) suggests that neoliberalism has in this period become a hegemonic mode of discourse, the effects of which on people’s ways of thinking have become so pervasive as to be seen as ‘common sense’ in how people view and interpret the world. In the post-2008 economic crisis, government narrative has been focused on diverting the attention of the public away from the possibility that it is three decades of ‘aggressive’ neoliberalism and unregulated banking which has led to the crisis. Indeed, Mirowski (2013) observes how rather than the economic crisis resulting in neoliberalism falling out of favour, instead the crisis was taken as ‘evidence’ for the need to reduce state interventions and welfare provision still further. Dorey (2014) argues that as part of this, the Conservative-dominated Coalition government (2010-2015) played ‘divide and rule’ by, for example, encouraging private sector workers to believe that public sector workers enjoy various unaffordable and unfair material advantages and privileges (e.g. pensions) on one side; while on the other encouraging ‘hard-working families’ to believe their ‘hard-earned’ taxes are being given away to welfare ‘scroungers’ enjoying ‘generous’ benefits rather than seeking employment. According to Dorey, such ‘strivers versus skivers’ rhetoric serves to secure support from the general public for policies relating to cutting welfare services and support (p. 20). Journalist and activist Owen Jones describes how both the government and media have:

fed us a relentless, poisonous diet of “skivers” and “scroungers”, of the feckless and workshy hiding behind blinds, subsidised by you, the hard-working taxpayer, who have to get up in the morning and slog your guts out. (Jones, 2014, p. 1).

Jones (2014) argues that it was the behaviour of the elite and privileged in society which led to a large increase in unemployment and underemployment in the 2010s, yet this group avoids scrutiny and surveillance, while it is the unemployed and those on low wages who are surveilled, criticised and even demonised. In addition, Dorey (2014) argues that both government and mass media work to exhort the general public that ‘other’ political ideologies (e.g. social



democracy) are unworkable and even dangerous to the extent that there is no viable alternative to neoliberalism, thereby discouraging the public from seeking a change in regime.

In relation to feminism, Walby (2011) considers the intensification of the neoliberal context to be one of the key challenges currently facing the movement and argues that the current context has become increasingly hostile to the concept of feminism. Over approximately the last thirty years, neoliberalism has intensified and with it inequality has increased and finance has been increasingly under-regulated. There has also been an associated process of de-democratisation, via the democratic state being replaced by market principles. Neoliberal civil societies tend to be marked by greater inequality, and greater commercialisation, including higher rates of sexual practices being marketised (such as pornography and prostitution) (Walby, 2011). As Dorey (2014) notes, neoliberalism tends to be marked by increasing inequality and a widening gap between rich and poor. It is the combination of rising inequality and shrinking of democratic spaces which Walby (2011) suggests is creating a more difficult environment for feminism to operate within and achieve its goals. One example of this can be seen in the sphere of higher education. The UK government has placed increasing pressure on universities to teach 'relevant' skills and applied knowledge is privileged, while critical theory is deemed a luxury. As Thornton (2015) observes: "Nothing is of significance unless it has use value<sup>2</sup> in the market" (p. 48).

The aim of neoliberalism is for governance to operate by and through market mechanisms, and reduce democratic state intervention. Through this switch from the state to the market, the context in which feminism makes its demands has changed and this makes feminism's work more difficult. Discursively, the state is constructed as 'bureaucratic', while the market is represented as better positioned for providing 'choice' and 'economic growth' (Walby, 2011). Thornton (2015) outlines how in the latter half of the twentieth century, 'the state' came to be seen as old-fashioned and one-dimensional. In conventional political theory, 'the state' is understood as a discrete sphere, and theorists such as Karl Marx gave no attention to the state's gendered or raced character (Thornton, 2015).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Use value' (also known as 'value in use') is an economics term which refers to the usefulness/utility of a commodity.

Similarly, Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that a psychosocial focus seems to be missing from much of the work carried out on neoliberalism. Such work tends to have sociological and/or political science focus. A useful psychosocial concept here is 'governmentality' as developed by Michel Foucault (2008).

Governmentality, according to Foucault (2008), has become the common ground for all modern forms of political rationality. Governmentality allows the exercise of power and is constituted by an ensemble of institutions, procedures, tactics, calculations, analyses, and reflections. Governmentality is not the exercise of sovereignty (i.e. by a monarch), nor is it the management of a population as a whole unit, but instead it is the regulation of the processes proper to the population. This refers to the laws and regulations which modulate a population's health, longevity, birth, death, wealth, and labour capacity. Foucault (2008) states that modern government rationality is about individualising and totalising, meaning government is concerned with identifying what it is for an individual and a population of individuals to be governed or governable. According to Foucault, governments are never sufficiently aware that they are at risk of governing too much, and governments never know how to govern 'just enough' (p. 17). While in the past, concern related to the abuse of sovereignty (i.e. a monarch abusing their power against their subjects), now the concern is with 'excessive governance' and delimiting governmental practice. In Foucauldian terms, government denotes the ways in which the self is tied up with power. Foucault views power as productive, not repressive. Rather than power being simply top-down in terms of oppressing subjects, power is seen to work through subjectivity. Governments commend what Foucault refers to as 'care of the self', whereby an individual is continuously employed in an enterprise of the self. Individuals are called upon to engage in this continual business of enterprise in order to make adequate provision for the preservation, reconstruction, and reproduction of their own capital. Neoliberalism exerts its power via techniques which responsabilise subjects. These techniques of the self link aptitude with self-awareness (reflexivity) and performance with self-realisation. Thornton (2015) suggests that Foucault's concept of governmentality enabled a more comprehensive and fluid understanding of 'the state', which views various aspects of society (including the self and the family) as productive sites of meaning. Those adopting the notion of governmentality, do not view the state as a static entity, and power is seen as

dispersed throughout the body of society, rather than being centred in traditional centres of decision-making such as Parliament or sovereignty (Thornton, 2015).

According to Walby (2011), neoliberalism, along with social democracy (social liberalism), are two of the most important variants of modernity. Neoliberalism is constituted by a focus on limiting the regulation of the market, and as Walby notes, results in increased inequality and a reduction in the depth of democracy. Thornton (2015) advances that under social liberalism: “the untrammelled play of individual freedom was tempered by a notion of collective good” (p. 47). Distributive justice was effected through state regulation and progressive taxation. In contrast, under neoliberalism, individual freedom (associated with masculinity) is maximised, while the (feminised) values of collective good and distributive justice are minimised. Thornton points to the tension between the concepts of freedom and equality. She likens this to a pendulum, via which ‘freedom’ is increased when the pendulum swings to the right and conservatism; while ‘equality’ is increased when the pendulum swings to the left and progressivism. Thornton argues that since the early 1970s, there has been a swing towards an aggressive reassertion of freedom, with the gains of social liberalism being rolled back. However, Thornton (2015) stresses that the state has not entirely disappeared under neoliberalism. Rather, the state as a driver of policy and power has been retained through the state operating behind the scenes through the market (under the guise of self-regulation). It is the appearance of self-regulation which Thornton believes to be one of the most successful ploys of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism has manifested in different times and different places in various forms including projects and governmental programmes (Walby, 2011). Though Walby (2011) states that as neoliberalism and its associated institutions and practices have become more powerful and deeply sedimented over time, this has led to it following a linear development from project, to governmental programme, to institutionalised social formation. Neoliberalism is understood as a mode of political and economic rationality (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Dorey (2014) refers to neoliberalism as an economic policy, which when adopted by governments involves the introduction of market principles into elements of the state (such as the National Health Service [NHS] and Higher Education), as well as emphasis on providing space for ‘the market’ to determine pay. Neoliberalism also consists

of principles such as the deregulation of banking and the financial sector; lower taxes for higher earners, privatisation of (formerly) nationalised industries (such as utilities and transport services), minimising welfare state provision; deindustrialisation and the devitalisation of trade unions (p. 34).

As I have already discussed above, 'the state' came to be seen as old-fashioned, and bureaucratic. In late modernity, an ethic of individualism has come to replace the role of the state, whereby citizens are exhorted to take responsibility for themselves (Thornton, 2015). As Thornton (2015) expounds, individual responsibility as a concept has been popularised and made palatable via liberal rhetoric of individual freedom, choice, and autonomy, and extended by neoliberal notions of competition, the market, and entrepreneurialism. In parallel with this, the ethic of care, the state, and social liberalism has come to be pejoratively dismissed as manifestations of the 'nanny state'. Indeed, one only has to peruse mainstream news outlets such as *The Express*, *Daily Mail*, and *The Sun* to see references made to 'the nanny state' in relation to public spheres such as the provision of child care services (and in association with this parenting support via Children's Centres), education (in relation to topics such as healthy eating, sex and relationships, use of the Internet and social media), and healthcare (in relation to sugar taxes, regulation of junk food advertising), and regulation of alcohol, smoking, and gambling to name just a few.

#### *1.3.4 Individualism and individualisation*

Theorists and critics adopting a discursive perspective in their work, place the concept of 'individualisation' within the political context of neoliberalism (Dawson, 2012). Lazzarato (2009) describes individualisation as being 'neoliberalism in action' due to the focus on choice, reflexivity, and self-responsibility. Individualisation constitutes individuals towards the reproduction of neoliberalism (Lazzarato, 2009). As argued by Gill and Scharff (2011), neoliberalism (as is postfeminism) is informed by a current of individualism. Individualism is a term which dates back to the nineteenth century, and as Lukes (1973) observes, is a term which is used with "an unusual lack of precision" (p. viii). The term in its original French form 'individualism' developed out of a general European reaction to both the French Revolution and the Enlightenment. Lukes (1973) describes

how in the early nineteenth century conservative thinkers condemned the appeal to the interests, reason, and rights of the individual and the French Revolution was taken as evidence that exalting the individual led to instability of the commonwealth and the erosion of civil society. Indeed, the idea of 'giving to the individual' was seen as 'wicked' and 'dangerous' with thinkers such as Joseph de Maistre wishing for the mind of the individual to be subsumed into that of 'the nation' (p. 5); Louis Veuillot referring to it as "The evil which plagues France" (p. 9); and Ferdinand Brunetière writing that individualism was "the great sickness of the present time" (p. 10). Lukes (1973) elucidates how the French meaning of the term 'individualism' was subject to cultural diffusion beyond France to countries such as Germany, the USA, and the UK. In the US, for instance, individualism came to be a term of great ideological significance. At various times there it came to express the philosophy of natural rights, individual freedom, justice and equal opportunity, the belief in free enterprise, and even the 'American Dream'. In contrast, in the UK, the term occupied a smaller role initially, used to refer to self-reliance and nonconformity in religion. By the end of the nineteenth century, individualism, came to be used in the UK to refer to the absence (or minimisation) of state intervention, and came to be associated (by both adherents and opponents) with classical liberalism.

According to Lukes (1973), over the first half of the twentieth century, social scientists, philosophers, and historians had come to use the term in a variety of contexts. This ranges from associations with Calvinism, the rise of capitalism, the growth of a 'possessive market society', the rise of Romanticism, and modern natural law theory. Indeed, as Lukes observes, the term 'individualism' was characterised by an: "immense and confusing variety of usage" (p. 42) and Lukes proposed that clarity could only be achieved through historically-oriented conceptual analysis of the differing ideas of what the term means. This is something Lukes (1973) attempted to do – isolating the basic ideas of individualism, mapping out conceptual distinctions and relations between the ideas. Lukes identified through his analysis the core values of individualism – equality in terms of liberty; and liberty and equality in terms of autonomy, privacy, self-development, and respect for persons.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, social scientists shifted focus towards individualism being seen as a consequence of social changes in late modernity.

Here, the term 'individualisation' is used to describe processes towards individualism or the state of being individualised. Individualisation as a concept has been of particular interest to sociologists and political scientists, with Ulrich Beck (1992), Anthony Giddens (1991), and Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2002a, 2002b) being key in developing individualisation as a theoretical concept (Dawson, 2012). I would also suggest the work of Anthony Elliot in relation to the concept of 'new individualism' as being pertinent to this discussion. I will now discuss in greater detail the different approaches these theorists hold in regards to individualisation.

Elliot (2012) describes how institutional forces have been identified as operating at a global level and promoting trends towards 'reflexive self-modernity', 'individualisation', and 'new individualism'. Elliot notes that one point of consensus across these social theories is that in conditions of intensive globalisation within the late modern period, individuals are increasingly expected to take responsibility for their own lives and to create individualised solutions to social problems. Elliot and Lemert (2006) argue that neither the concepts of 'risk' nor 'reflexivity' adequately capture the rising significance of identity in a global age. Instead, they argue it is more useful to focus on social practices of reinvention. Elliot and Lemert argue that human agents reshape their identities through what they refer to as 'new individualism'. New individualism is tied fundamentally to what Elliot (2012) refers to as 'the reinvention craze', which is made up of social practices which are geared towards 'instant change'. Elliot here provides examples of 'the reinvention craze' occurring across the globe: self-help manuals, life coaches, corporate networking, instant identity makeovers, therapy culture, cosmetic surgery, and compulsive consumerism. Elliot suggests that a 'plastic' culture of reinvention, flexibility, and reorganisation has profound consequences for the lives of individuals both privately and publicly.

Elliot and Lemert (2006) believe that there are four institutional drivers of new individualism: 1) reinvention, 2) instant change, 3) speed, and 4) short-termism. New individualism is marked by a relentless drive towards individuals constantly reinventing their selves. This is exemplified by the pressure placed via an ethos of consumerism on individuals to 'improve' and 'transform' all aspects of their lives including their minds, bodies, diet, sex lives, careers, homes, and gardens. Individuals are also driven by an endless hunger for 'instant change' served by a

vast range of market-directed, consumer culture solutions. Examples include, plastic surgery, instant makeover reality television shows, speed dating, and therapy culture. Elliot and Lemert refer to this as the rise of the 'Instant Generation'. Society is also said to have become intoxicated with speed, dynamism, and accelerated change. The culture of short-termism (or episodicity), as exemplified through the rise in short-term job contracts, and the decline of the 'job for life', puts pressure on individuals to keep refashioning themselves as more efficient, faster, inventive, enterprising, and more flexible than ever. To Elliot (2012) what is most significant about the new individualism, is how individuals recreate identities and the speed at which identities can be reinvented and instantly transformed. He argues that it is the emphasis on 'instant transformation' (and the fears and anxieties which practices of reinvention are designed to displace) which distinguishes the theory of 'new individualism' from Giddens' 'reflexive modernity' and Beck's 'risk society'.

Anthony Giddens, as Dawson (2012) points out, rarely refers to 'individualisation' directly, and instead Giddens refers to 'reflexive modernity' and has developed an optimistic reading of the processes associated with individualisation. Giddens (1991) stresses that the self is not a passive entity which is determined by external influences, but rather that individuals forge their identities and in turn contribute to social influences. To Giddens, new mechanisms have emerged which are both shaped by and shape institutions of modernity. Giddens refers to modernity as a 'post-traditional order' (p. 2) and as a risk culture. Giddens (1991) agrees with Ulrich Beck's characterisation of late modernity as a 'risk society' as he believes that no aspects of our day-to-day lives follow a predestined course as was the case in pre-modern and early modern societies. To live in a 'risk society' individuals are required to have a calculating attitude to help navigate an indefinite range of potential courses of action (along with the attendant risks). While modernity could be said to have reduced risk in relation to certain areas and modes of life (such as in relation to healthcare, sanitation, and medicine), in parallel new risks have been introduced which previous generations did not face (such as the threat of nuclear weapons, ecological catastrophe, and the rise of totalitarian superstates) and these become part of everyday life and therefore an unavoidable part of the contemporary experience. In late modern society, the influence of such distant happenings on the self have become more commonplace due to the role played by the media (both printed and electronic –

the latter of which I would suggest in the twenty-first century has become even more pronounced due to the rise of social media). In pre-modern societies, the news a person could access was more local in focus, and any news from further away (in particular from other countries) would appear at a very late date after the event. In late modernity by contrast, distant events are able to intrude into everyday consciousness via the media. Giddens (1991) argues that mediated experience has long been an influence on self-identity and the organisation of social relations. Against the backdrop of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised enterprise. The reflexive project of the self involves individuals sustaining a coherent (yet constantly revised) biographical narrative. As tradition lost its hold over people in late modernity, the notion of lifestyle became more significant in relation to the constitution of self-identity. To Giddens, 'lifestyle' refers to not just pursuits of the affluent, but also decisions taken and courses of action taken under conditions of severe material constraint.

Giddens (1991) views individual reflexivity as a universal process, meaning there is no person who is more reflexive or individualised than another. All are required to be as reflexive as anyone else, regardless of gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability, marital status, employment status, and so on. Everyone in late modernity is required to engage day-by-day in decisions concerning their life and how to live it. Giddens believes that every person, to some extent, is aware of both the reflexive constitution of modern social activities and the implications of this on her/his life. Self-identity forms a trajectory over the duration of the 'life cycle' across different late modern institutions, though he argues that the term 'life cycle' is less applicable in late modernity than in prior traditional society. Instead, in late modernity, individuals have *and* live a 'biography' which is reflexively organised in relation to information about possible ways of life. In this context, the self becomes a 'reflexive project' and "How shall I live?" is a question which an individual must answer each day in regards to many activities including how to behave, what to wear, what to eat and so forth (p. 14). In the past, transitions in people's lives (such as the move from adolescence to adulthood) were often ritualised in the form of 'rites of passage' and the changed identity was clearly laid out for an individual to take up. In late modernity however, the changed identity has to be explored and constructed by the individual themselves as part of a reflexive process. Giddens describes how psychology has become bound up with the reflexivity of the self, and that this can be seen in the rise of therapy and



counselling. Giddens contests the negative interpretation of the rise in therapy as a response to the debilitating effects of modern institutions and the notion that the individual in late modernity feels bereft and unsupported psychologically by the absence of traditional institutions. Rather, Giddens suggests that whilst this view may contain some elements of validity, it is substantially inadequate. He argues that: "Therapy is not simply a means of coping with novel anxieties, but an expression of the reflexivity of the self" (p. 34).

To Giddens, individuals are now removed from collective categorisation: "We are not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (Giddens, 1991, p. 75), and with this, the importance of traditional forms of social classification and differentiation become less important. Not only does Giddens see individualisation freeing people from traditional constraints and expectations, he in particular sees it as freeing women from traditional gender norms and expectations.

Of all the individualisation theorists, Dawson (2012) argues that Beck has developed the most systematic theorisation of individualisation. Beck (1992) considers globalisation as one of the causes of individualisation, along with the late modern<sup>3</sup> process of institutionalised individualism. Beck sees individualisation as having emerged within the context of the rise neoliberalism as an ideology. To Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), individualisation is not only an individual orientation, but is also a form of social organisation. They suggest that in late modernity, social reproduction is individually generated, whereby new demands, constraints and controls are imposed on the individual. In parallel with this, previously existing social forms (such as gender roles, class, the family, and community) are disintegrating. In modern society, central institutions are geared to the individual and not the group. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, basic rights are internalised and people are exhorted to be economically active, and in turn the foundations of social coexistence are destroyed. As individuals are called upon to make decisions in relation to their lives, they are required to develop 'risk-coping biographies'. Beck refers to these as 'biographical solutions' for systemic contradictions.

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<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Beck uses the term 'second modernity' to refer to the contemporary era.

Like Giddens, Beck has a more optimistic reading of trends and processes associated with late modernity. Dawson (2012) sums up both Beck and Giddens's positions in regards to individualisation as 'disembedded'. This position holds that social characteristics (such as gender, ethnicity, class, and so on) which prior were taken as having an impact on an individual, are now viewed as being diminished in significance. Instead, individuals are seen as holding ever-increasing power and agency, and in turn individuals are increasingly empowered and are seen to be 'beyond' previous forms of social constraint. For example, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) conceptualise inequality as being a result of choices made by the disembedded individual, rather than existing prior to these choices. In sum, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) believe therefore, that individualisation in and of itself does not produce stratification, though they concede that some of the effects of individualisation may cause divisions. In their view, processes of individualisation lead to a lessening of identification with categories such as class and gender. The implication here is that analytical concepts such as gender become devalued and are effectively turned into 'zombie categories'. Dawson (2012) suggests this disembedded thesis is problematic for sociology, due to how categories of social differentiation have long been the basis of sociological research. Dawson concludes that the disembedded perspective in regards to equality and empowerment is flawed and that there is little evidence to support it.

In contrast with the disembedded thesis of individualisation is the embedded thesis. Here, there is greater focus on the way late modern society privatises what were previously collective concerns. It is the work of Zygmunt Bauman which characterises the embedded thesis. Bauman (2002a) asserts that one of the trademarks of modern society is to cast members as 'individuals', and that this casting is an activity which is re-enacted on a daily basis:

Modern society exists in its activity of 'individualizing', as much as the activities of individuals consist in that daily reshaping and renegotiating of their mutual engagements which is called 'society'. Neither of the two partners stays put for long.  
(Bauman, 2002a, p. xiv).

According to Bauman (2002a), the meaning of 'individualisation' changes over time, and in the early twenty-first century, it means something different to what it meant a century ago. According to Bauman (2002a), individualisation consists in the transformation of 'identity' from being 'a given', into a 'task'. An individual has

to take personal responsibility for performing the task, as well as responsibility for the consequences of their performance. The implication of this is that humans are no longer 'born into' their identities, but instead must 'become' what one is. In other words, determination of social standing has been replaced in modernity with compulsory and obligatory self-determination. While other theorists frame individualised responsibility as empowerment and freedom for people, Bauman stresses that individualisation is a fate and not a choice, as the risks and contradictions of life continue and are still socially produced. What is now different and individualised is the person's duty (and ability) to cope with these risks. Bauman (2002a) contends that the self-assertive ability of people is no greater than it was in the past. Just because responsibility is now placed with individuals rather than with society and government does not mean necessarily that people will be able to succeed and/or pull themselves out of any difficulties faced. Further to this, Bauman highlights how as a result of an emphasis on individualised responsibility, if a person fails, they have only themselves to blame. For example, if a person is unemployed it is framed as them having not tried hard enough to find a job; or if a person falls ill it is because they were not resolute and disciplined enough in adhering to a health regime. Bauman elucidates how people come to believe this placement of blame on the individual as though it were: "indeed the truth of the matter" (p. xvi) as this is what people are told. Bauman (2002b) expands by explaining how an individual is more dependent upon and subject to market forces than ever before, while simultaneously being unaware of these forces, let alone able to anticipate them. How an individual goes about their life becomes the "biographical solution to systemic contradictions" (p. 68), but this however, is an oxymoron contends Bauman. Bauman states that 'control over life' is how the story of life is told to all, but is not the way in which life is lived. The exhortation on individuals to come up with their own solutions, is not in itself a matter of choice. Individualist rhetoric diverts people's attention away from considering collective solutions and implies that the way society works has been settled conclusively and therefore it is only individuals which can be changed and redirected.

Bauman (2002a) postulates that in early modernity, what he refers to as 'stiff frames of estate' (p. xv) were broken up and replaced with 'class'. He explains that membership of estates was simply a matter of ascription (i.e. inherited or 'born into'), while membership of classes is constituted by achievement, and

therefore class membership has to be constantly reviewed and renewed via day-to-day conduct. However, in contrast to Giddens and Beck, Zygmunt Bauman has maintained a more critical approach to individualisation and associated notions of meritocracy and achievement. Bauman contends that class division is a by-product of unequal access to resources, and it is resources which are required in order to render self-assertion effective. What this means is that people with fewer resources, have in turn less choice. Bauman (2002a) argues that while class membership is negotiable, rather than ascribed, class can be just as solid, unalterable, and resistant to manipulation by individuals as estates were previously. Bauman further argues that both gender and class are heavily linked to a person's range of choices, and therefore influencing the range of identities available for individuals to claim.

Bauman (2002a) observes that individualisation leads to the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship, in that there is no sense of 'common interests' except for providing individuals with the freedom to satisfy her/his interests alone. He suggests that the concerns and preoccupations of "individuals qua individuals fill the public space" (p. xviii) and in turn denies any space for public discourse. Indeed, the public and private spheres are cast as entirely discreet worlds which are subject to different logics which are untranslatable, rendering the two as incommunicado (Bauman, 2002b).

Bauman considers that a shift from a 'producer' to 'consumer' capitalism is one of the causes of individualisation. While Bauman (2000) agrees with Beck that individuals are encouraged to identify and conduct biographical solutions to systemic problems, this is not available to everyone. In contrast with Beck (2002), Bauman (2000) argues that there *is* stratification within individualisation. Due to the universality of individualisation, all people are required to take individual responsibility towards political, as well as identity-based ends. As Dawson (2012) notes, only a small number of people can achieve this as they have the resources (financial and non-financial) to do so. It is this point that has led Bauman to link individualisation to consumerism. In contrast with Giddens and Beck, Bauman (2007) argues that individualisation is an uneven distribution of freedoms (marked by constant uncertainty and ambivalence), whereby those who are unable to act upon their choices become positioned as 'faulty consumers'. Here, 'freedom' depends on the ability of the individual to pay and consume. Bauman

goes even further by arguing that 'freedom' is privatisation of responsibility disguised as freedom.

### *1.3.5 Tying it all together*

I have outlined the key theories on postfeminism, neoliberalism, and individualisation and will now tie this together to clarify my position in relation to these and how I will be using these concepts over the course of this thesis.

To clarify, in regards to individualisation, it is Bauman's theory which I most align with. While Giddens, and Beck's theories provide good descriptions of late modernity and the impact of globalisation, their readings of individualisation are ultimately optimistic and not as critical as Bauman's. To Giddens and Beck, individualisation has 'freed' people from the shackles of pre-destination and a fixed place in society. Giddens (1991) sees individuals as now being free from tradition to make their own decisions over their life course. He also believes that people are aware of the reflexive constitution of modern social activities and the implications they have, but I agree with Bauman (2002b) that people are more than ever subject to the whims of market forces and are in the main unaware of these forces, and therefore unable to anticipate or take any action in relation to them. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) hold that social categories of old such as gender and class are disintegrating and no longer have a hold over people as they did in the past. Women in particular, are positioned as being the beneficiaries of individualisation and suggested to be increasingly unshackled from the constraining gender roles of the past. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim believe that individualisation does not cause inequality, and instead any inequalities which exist are the result of choices made by individuals (as opposed to existing prior to these choices). Bauman (2002a) on the other hand contests this notion, arguing that just because people now have greater responsibility (rather than society or government), does not mean their ability to succeed or face difficulties is any greater than it was in the past. People still need the resources to challenge any strife in their life (such as job loss), but they are now blamed for their failure. I share these concerns with Bauman, and also note that these concerns are shared by feminist academics as well.

Ong (2006) cautions that neoliberalism can mean many different things depending on one's position and it can change meaning as it shifts location. Gill and Scharff (2011) note that neoliberalism has: "become a 'catch-all' term incapable of explaining or illuminating anything" (p. 6). Rather than advocating an abandonment of the term 'neoliberalism', Gill and Scharff (2011) propose that neoliberalism should be explored in relation to subjectivity and the lived realities of people's lives. Gill and Scharff (2011) use the term subjectivity (rather than identity) to signal the extent to which they see power operating on and through the making and remaking of subjectivities. A particular concern among feminist writers regards questions of agency. Within postfeminist and neoliberal contexts, young women are often presented as agentic, autonomous, empowered subjects. Some academics such as Duits and van Zoonen (2006; 2007) employ a more optimistic and celebratory tone, advocating feminist researchers listen to girls and understand their choices as the girls frame them. They stress the need to treat girls as capable and responsible agents and to position girls as actors (rather than as objects of study). However, I side with Gill's (2007c) contention that such an approach is caught up within the individualising, neoliberal paradigm which needs critiquing. Duits and van Zoonen (2007) argue that girls' interpretations of their decision-making needs to be listened to first and foremost, before articulating them with any wider social force. Gill (2007c) on the other hand believes that this does not provide any sense of a cultural context within which girls are making their choices, thereby rendering girls as socially and culturally dislocated.

Gill and Scharff (2011) propose that there is a need to investigate the relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism. They suggest that there is a 'powerful resonance' operating between neoliberalism and postfeminism on at least three levels:- 1) both are informed by a current of individualism which treats individuals as operating within a socio-cultural vacuum (and denies that individuals are subject to any external constraints or influences); 2) postfeminism is a sensibility which is at least partly constituted through neoliberal ideas. This can be seen in how the active, choice-making, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism runs in parallel with the autonomous, calculating and self-regulating subject of neoliberalism; 3) women are called upon to a greater extent than men are to self-regulate, work on, and transform the self. This suggests to Gill and Scharff (2011) the possibility that this particular facet of neoliberalism has always been

gendered, with women being constructed as the ideal subjects of neoliberalism. Indeed, there is much feminist work which supports the notion that there are links between postfeminism and neoliberalism. From the 1990s onwards, a rhetoric of 'girl power' has been identified as encouraging girls to shape their subjectivities and treat them as 'projects of the self'. New identities are available to be created via purchases of the 'right' product. Difficulties and strife can be resolved through self-help books, therapy, and self-esteem workshops (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2004). Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2004) read girl power rhetoric as assisting in the production of the self-inventing subject of neoliberalism. Coupled with this both femininity and feminism are appropriated by notions around choice through consumption. Individual choice is valorised (Fraser, 2013). Thornton (2015) describes how the market has transformed citizens into consumers who are obsessed with the visible markers of success and who see social justice and gender equality as passé concepts.

Contemporary gender relations have come to be seen as emblematic as presenting an idealised form of the self broken free from tradition and able (and indeed required) to be refashioned by the individual. Ward and Benjamin (2004) note how the process of forging an adult identity in late modernity has become individualised. McRobbie (2008) discusses how old social institutions (such as the family, education, law, and medicine) were charged with the responsibility of producing and reproducing the category of 'girl'. Specifically producing 'girl' as a particular kind of subject and thereby ensuring 'appropriate' processes of sexual differentiation takes place here. In late modernity the responsibility charged to these institutions has eroded, and according to McRobbie (2008), a new normalising process (consumer culture) has replaced the old one (social institutions). In late modernity, economic independence is a citizen's right and duty and in the West, political, social, and civil rights have been reconceptualised around this requirement. This means an individual's responsibility to support themselves *must* come before the state's duty of care to support them. This has a particular resonance for women (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2004). According to Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2004), traditionally young women associated adulthood with increased responsibilities in the domestic sphere, but in late modernity they are increasingly encouraged to embrace their rights in the public sphere. This however, tends to translate into an expectation that young women combine employment with domestic responsibilities, and without any reliance on

the state. In other words, for young women, active citizenship means to take responsibility for their own economic wellbeing *and* in providing care for others. Indeed, rather than seeing women as simply being newly liberated subjects freed by the processes of individualisation (as Giddens and Beck do), I see individualisation as a concern, such as in regards to how active citizenship is linked with the ability to consume. Like Bauman (2002a; 2002b), I believe that young women are subject to social forces such as the market and that their agency is dependent upon the resources they hold. Defining citizenship in terms of consumer power rather than productivity, and in turn determining an individual's success based upon their ability to spend and consume is problematic. For instance, as Harris (2004b) argues, some young women are produced as 'failed' subjects and this is achieved via an uncritical analysis of their circumstantial disadvantage and an emphasis on their personal wilfulness and competence. Structural disadvantage is recast as laziness, incompetence, bad parenting, and/or poor decision-making.

As explained earlier (see 1.3.2), I treat postfeminism as an object of critical analysis, rather than as a theoretical perspective or as a movement. As observed by some feminists (Gamble, 2001a; Fudge, 2006), postfeminism (and girl power) are not labels which are self-adopted, nor is postfeminism a movement which women identify themselves as being a part of. I view postfeminism as a sensibility (see Gill, 2007b; Gill and Scharff, 2011), one which is characterised by individualism, personal choice, consumerism, subjectification, self-surveillance, retrosexism (the resurgence of traditional, separate feminine and masculine roles), backlash, girl power (notions around depoliticised personal empowerment, reclaiming femininity and individual aspirations and achievement), and elements of a double-entanglement (of acknowledging, but rejecting feminism) (McRobbie, 2009). I also view postfeminism as being a sensibility which has been produced via the conditions and thinking created by a societal context which has been informed by neoliberalism.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the research**

The first objective of this research is to examine discourses in the medium of printed women's monthly magazines and online feminist blogs, paying attention



to how gender and feminism are constructed. This objective is also concerned with what subject positions are made available by these discourses. This first objective was addressed by Study 1 (magazines) and Study 2 (blogs) which were both media text studies involving a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of the media sampled.

The research questions for Study 1 are:

- 1a) How are gender and feminism discursively constructed in women's monthly magazines?
- 1b) What subject positions are being made available by these discourses?

The research questions for Study 2 are:

- 2a) How are gender and feminism discursively constructed in online feminist blogs?
- 2b) What subject positions are being made available by these discourses?

The second objective of the research was concerned with exploring how young women interpret and construct gender and feminism and the difficulties/tensions (if any) they encounter in negotiating these. This objective was also concerned with how young women position themselves in relation to feminism. This objective was addressed by Study 3 which involved a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of data generated from seven mini-focus group discussions with young women aged 18-30.

The research questions for Study 3 are:

- 3a) How do young women co-construct feminism?
- 3b) How do young women position themselves in relation to feminism?
- 3c) What are the difficulties and contradictions young women encounter in claiming a feminist subjectivity within the context of mini-focus groups?

## **1.5 Summary of the chapter and outline of the thesis**

I will now provide a summary of this chapter, followed by an outline of the structure of this thesis. This will provide the reader with a 'roadmap' of the thesis

chapters and impart an impression of what each chapter will cover in terms of content.

The aim of this prologue chapter was to provide the reader with an introduction to this thesis and provide some contextual information on theoretical concepts drawn upon throughout. This chapter began by setting the scene for the chosen research topic of this thesis through providing an overview of debates concerned with the state of the feminist movement, beginning in the 1990s, and through to the 2010s. I hoped to provide the reader with a taste of the larger debates which will be covered in the thesis, including the way young women have been constructed as non-feminists by feminists and the media alike. The middle section of this chapter provided contextual information for the reader in regards to theoretical concepts used in this thesis. This is in regards to the concepts of 'feminism', 'gender', 'postfeminism', 'neoliberalism', and 'individualisation'. Here, these concepts are 'unpacked' and the differences and links between the concepts of 'postfeminism', 'neoliberalism', and 'individualisation' are clarified. The following section of this chapter concentrated on clarifying the objectives of this research project.

The second chapter of this thesis is a literature review of one of the key debates which underpins this thesis: is feminism dead (irrelevant) in contemporary Britain? What this chapter aims to do is to first explore debates in the media (from the late 1980s through to the 2010s) in regards to feminism. This will include looking at media interest in the debate and attempts made by business organisations and women's magazines to 'rebrand feminism'. The remainder of this chapter will then compare two alternative narratives drawn upon by feminists in response to this debate: 1) the pessimistic narrative which some feminists deploy, bemoaning the decline of radical feminist politics and its apparent replacement with a more mainstream and popular mode of feminism which emphasises individual empowerment through choice and 2) the optimistic narrative which is deployed by feminists who counter the notion that 'feminism is dead' and instead argue it is alive, active and vibrant.

The third chapter of this thesis is a review of academic research informing my chosen area of study, with the overall aim of positioning this thesis in feminist literature. This chapter will begin by discussing developments in the field of girls'

studies, in particular in relation to topics such as feminism, 'girl power', and political citizenship. This will then be followed by an examination of academic research in relation to gender and the media, with particular attention paid to research on women's magazines, zines, and online media (such as blogs). This will inform my rationale in regards to the value of studying such forms of media. The next part of this chapter will be concerned with exploring academic research from fields such as psychology and sociology which have investigated young women's identification with feminism. I will then discuss how my research proposes to build upon previous research on young women and feminism and put forward what this research's contributions to the field will be. This will then lead into an outline of the aims of the research project, as well as a breakdown of the research questions for each of the three studies.

The fourth chapter of this thesis is focused on presenting the methodological and epistemological framework for this research project. This will begin with a discussion of the key characteristics of qualitative research methods, followed by a delineation of the difference between experiential and critical approaches within qualitative research. I will then move on to discuss the ontological (relativism) and epistemological (social constructionism) framework which informs this research project. I will then provide a rationale for my decision in using mini-focus groups for Study 3, discussing how this is an appropriate method of data collection for feminist research. Finally, I will discuss the chosen analytical approach (feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis) and its theoretical underpinnings. Here, I will discuss the different approaches to discourse analysis and provide a rationale for the approach used in this thesis.

The fifth chapter of this thesis is a discussion of the data collection, analysis and findings of Study 1, which is a media text study employing feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of women's monthly magazines. The first part of this chapter will detail the data collection method for the media text study. This will involve a justification and description of how the material was sampled and the analytical steps taken. The second part of this chapter will present the findings from this study. This will be centred around a discussion of the three discourses which were identified: 1) "Girls just want to have fun": a postfeminist discourse of 'girl power' and the 'phallic girl', 2) "Cause I depend on me": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of self-improvement,

personal responsibility and self-surveillance, and 3) “All you need is love”: a traditionalist discourse of ‘necessary heterosexuality’, ‘reproductive destiny’ and romance.

The sixth chapter of this thesis is a discussion of the data collection, analysis and findings from Study 2, which is a media text study employing feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of feminist-created internet blogs. The first part of this chapter will detail the data collection method for the media text study. This will involve explaining why feminist online blogs were chosen as the sample for Study 2, as well as describing how the material was sampled and the analytical steps taken. The second part of this chapter will present the findings from this study. This will be centred around a discussion of the two discourses which were identified: 1) “Do what you want. How want”: a postfeminist discourse as constituted by ‘girl power’ notions of aspiration, empowerment, and personal choice; and 2) “Are you feminist enough?”: a feminist discourse of ‘the good feminist’.

The seventh chapter of this thesis is a discussion of the data collection, analysis and the findings from Study 3, which is a mini-focus group study involving young women aged 18-30 years. The first part of this chapter will detail the data collection method for the mini-focus group study. This will involve explaining how the discussion schedule was designed, sampling procedures, and how the mini-focus groups were conducted. For the second part of this chapter, the focus will turn to discussing the first of the three discourses which were identified in Study 3. The discourse examined here is 1) “What is feminism for? The war is won”: a postfeminist discourse as based around notions of feminism’s ‘pastness’.

The eighth chapter of this thesis is a continuation of the discussion of Study 3’s findings. This will be centred around a discussion of the remaining two of the three discourses identified: 2) “Sisters are looking out for themselves”: a postfeminist sensibility as constituted by personal choice, individualised responsibility, and the ‘can-do girl’; and 3) “We want ‘equalityism’, not feminism”: a postfeminist discourse as constituted by backlash notions such as ‘what about teh menz’?

The ninth chapter of this thesis is a reflexive discussion chapter which reflects back on the work carried out over the course of this research project, as well as the thesis' original contribution. This chapter will begin with a summary of the research aims and the discourses identified across the data. This will be followed by an evaluation of the research which will begin with a discussion of key debates in relation to evaluating research. I will critique positivist notions of evaluation (such as validity) and put forward a case for taking a different approach to evaluating qualitative research (such as through the use of reflexivity). I will then move on to evaluate the research using three forms of reflexivity as developed by Wilkinson (1988). The first will be personal reflexivity, whereby I will reflect on my personal values, social positioning and investments in the research topic. This will be followed by functional reflexivity, where I will consider the benefits and limitations of the chosen methodology and discuss any issues encountered during the research process and how I overcame these. Discussion will then move onto disciplinary reflexivity, whereby I will discuss the implications of the research and present a consideration of the thesis' contribution to feminist literature. Finally, I will suggest some points for further development, discussing avenues for future research and set forth some concluding remarks to this thesis.

In the first part of this chapter, I hoped to provide a flavour of the key debates about the currency of the UK feminist movement and constructions around young women's engagement with or repudiation of a feminist subjectivity. In the next chapter, I will be unpacking this debate, exploring it in greater detail with a particular focus on two main narratives (pessimistic, and optimistic) which dominates the way these debates are responded to by feminists (Dean, 2010).

## **CHAPTER 2 - 'FEMINISM IS DEAD! LONG LIVE FEMINISM!': DEBATES ON THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

### **2.1 Introduction**

#### *2.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The aim of this chapter is to provide a literature review of one of the key debates which underpin this present thesis. This debate centres around whether in the UK the feminist movement is now out-of-date or even defunct to the extent that young women may consider feminism to be irrelevant to their lives and thus do not identify with it. The focus of this chapter concerns debates found in academic literature, as well as non-academic forums including the media and the World Wide Web (including news sites, women's organisations' websites, and feminist blogs). Debates in these non-academic forums are being included in this chapter in order to provide context for this thesis. This research was initially inspired by debates in the media in regards to feminism's currency in the early twenty-first century, as well as my own observations of an increase in feminist activity taking place in online spaces. The academic debates explored in this chapter focus on feminist responses to the 'is feminism dead?' debate. These responses generally fall into two narratives: pessimistic; and optimistic (Dean, 2010).

There are three parts which comprise chapter two. The first part is concerned with exploring debates in the media and the World Wide Web from the late 1980s, through to the 2010s. The focus here is on how the media over the course of this period has 'declared' feminism as being dead, outdated and no longer considered to be relevant by young women living in contemporary Britain. The second part of this chapter examines feminist responses to the debate which draw upon pessimistic narratives (such as the view espoused by some feminist scholars that the feminist movement has become less visible, less radical and more fragmented in recent years). Focus then shifts to an examination of postfeminism, criticisms made against second wave feminism, and feminist critiques of the emergence of popular modes of feminism. The third part of this chapter examines feminist responses to the debate which draw upon optimistic narratives (such as feminists who argue that the feminist movement is experiencing a resurgence of activity in the 2010s). This includes discussions of

the third and fourth waves of feminism, as well as consideration of potential reasons why these modes of feminism have largely gone unrecognised or dismissed by older feminists, academia, and the media alike (Siegel, 2007; Redfern & Aune, 2010).

## **2.2 “Feminism is dead”: Media proclamations of feminism’s ‘demise’, and marketing attempts at ‘rebranding’ feminism**

### *2.2.1 Backlash and traditional media outlets’ reporting on feminism’s ‘death’*

Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001) expound how writing about feminism in the late 1990s was not particularly easy. This was not only because of how diverse feminist thought had become (as I noted in chapter 1); it was also because of the amount of ‘bad press’ feminism had received by that point. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers outline how this ‘bad press’ falls into three (contradictory) categories: 1) the ‘warning’ that women’s gains in the 1960s and 1970s have come at a cost (e.g. burnout); 2) attacks on feminists as being ‘aggressive’ and ‘manhating’; and 3) the intimation that feminism is no longer necessary or relevant.

The first of these categories which Faludi (1993) identified in *Backlash*, was the promulgation by media sources such as newspapers of the message that women’s liberation may have been ‘won’, but that this had come at a cost. Through this construction of women’s liberation as a ‘Pyrrhic victory’<sup>4</sup>, feminism is blamed for various problems such as ‘burn-out’, infertility, and loneliness and is presented as having had a negative impact on the lives of women (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Faludi (1993) illustrates how the 1980s marked the beginning of the New Right’s war on women (particularly in relation to reproductive rights). Since then, and through to the present, newspapers perpetuated myths about the ‘damage’ caused by feminism. Recent examples from the press include headlines such as “Warning: Feminism is bad for your health” (Dobson, The Independent on Sunday, 2007); “Women less happy after

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<sup>4</sup> A ‘Pyrrhic victory’ is a victory whereby such a devastating toll is inflicted on the victor that it negates their sense of success and achievement.

40 years of feminism” (Woods, *The Sunday Times*, 2009); and “Has feminism killed the art of home cooking?” (Prince, *Daily Mail*, 2010).

The second category of ‘bad press’ involved attacks on feminists themselves, with those who identify as feminists being painted as ‘misguided’, ‘aggressive’ and ‘man-hating’. Scholz (2010) posits that all too often feminists are portrayed as militant and serious, suggesting that this may explain some women’s reluctance in claiming the label. Scholz argues that this militant stereotype is used to dismiss the sound arguments for social justice made by feminists. Indeed, this is a problem that I have observed myself in conversations both face-to-face and online in relation to women’s issues with the term ‘feminazi’ frequently being used. In the 2010s, this backlash spread to social media with anti-feminist campaigns appearing on sites such as Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. One example is the ‘Women Against Feminism’ campaign which is a Twitter hashtag often accompanied by photographs of women holding up placards. On these placards are written statements by the women explaining why they disapprove of modern feminism and feel that it has become a ‘toxic’ movement (BBC Trending, 2014). These statements usually begin with the phrase “I don’t need feminism because...” and followed by statements such as: “a world without men would suck” (Smith, 2014, p. 1), “Feminism has become a pseudonym for bullying”, “I love being an engineer, but I’d rather just be Mom” and “My self-worth is not directly tied to the size of my victim complex!” (Wente, 2014, p. 1). The campaign first appeared on Tumblr in July 2013, and then was set up as a group on Facebook in January 2014 by an anonymous curator (BBC Trending, 2014) and is still an active group in 2018 (with an expansion towards blogging by this point). The recent rise of this campaign concerns me due to how many of these women’s claims appear to be rooted in old stereotypes of feminism such as the ‘man-hating feminist’ and tropes around feminists being intolerant towards stay-at-home mothers is being disseminated around uncritically and unquestioningly. Perhaps even more concerning, is the subsequent sense of glee which could be found in media reports of the campaign. When this campaign caught the attention of various media outlets, headlines were generated such as: “Is feminism still relevant? Some women posting why they don’t need it” (Kim, *Today News*, 2014); “Anti-feminists baffle feminists” (Durgin, *National Review*, 2014); “Not all feminists: How modern feminism has become complicated, messy and sometimes alienating” (Boesveld,



National Post, 2014); “Young: Daughters of feminism strike back” (Young, Newsday, 2014a); “The shocking rise of ‘Women Against Feminism’ (and all on Emmeline Pankhurst’s birthday)” (Grazia Daily, 2014); and “Stop Fem-Splaining: What ‘Women Against Feminism’ gets right” (Young, TIME, 2014b).

The third category relates to how feminism has often been presented as a worn-out cause which is no longer necessary or relevant to the lives of women today due to feminism being seen as having achieved its goals of emancipating women (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). It is this third category which is of particular interest to this thesis. As far back as the late 1980s, the media (particularly newspapers) have run headlines declaring that ‘feminism is dead’. These headlines have tended to be accompanied by claims that feminism has done its ‘job’ and that the ‘gender war’ is over. According to Faludi, during the late 1980s, this ‘feminism is dead’ narrative began to hold sway in popular opinion:

The barricades have fallen, politicians assure us. Women have ‘made it’, the style-pages cheer. Women’s fight for equality has ‘largely been won’, *Time* magazine announces. Enrol at any university, join any law firm, apply for credit at any bank. Women have so many opportunities now, corporate leaders say, that we don’t really need equal opportunities policies. Women are so equal now, lawmakers say, that we no longer need equal rights legislation. (Faludi, 1993, p. 1).

In 1991, *The Independent* reported a meeting which took place in the House of Commons attended by a group of approximately fifty business women. This group had, at the time, recently formed a ‘select sisterhood’ called *Club 2000*. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss whether feminism was ‘dead’ or not: “‘It is with a sense of dread,’ announced Jenny Kirkpatrick, Director of Public Affairs at the PR agency Burson-Marsteller, “that I draw attention to a very horrid truth - The Age of Feminism is dead”” (Barwick, 1991, p. 15). Articles such as this continued to appear in the press over the following twenty years, positioning feminism as outdated, irrelevant, and even as embarrassing (Walters, 2005; Scholz, 2010). For example, “Feminism: outmoded and unpopular” (Ward, *The Guardian*, 2003); “Bra-burning feminism has reached burn-out” (Freen, *The Times*, 2003); “The Death of Feminism?” (Bunting, *The Guardian*, 2004); “Where have all the feminists gone?” (Williams, *New Statesman*, 2006); “Where are all the millennial feminists?” (Weinberger, *CNN*, 2012); and “Today’s young women have betrayed feminism” (Alibhai-Brown, *The Independent*, 2013). Perhaps most well known was the headline “Is feminism dead?” which was featured on the

cover of *TIME* magazine in 1998. The article within focused on discussing the author's claims that feminism was becoming indulgent and self-absorbed, as well as the suggestion that feminists were more likely to attend celebrity parties than engage with the needs of working-class women (Bellafante, *TIME*, 1998). As I'll be discussing later in this chapter (see 2.3 and 2.4), I argue that claims being made by the media regarding feminism's death are overly simplistic, as well as failing to acknowledge the existence of feminist activity taking place in the 1990s and the 2000s. I would go further to suggest that such media articles are ill-researched, narrow in terms of what they consider to be feminism, and (particularly authors such as Bellafante) lacking in awareness of the range and variety of feminist work in supporting women during this period from organisations old and new (such as The Fawcett Society and Women's Aid).

### 2.2.2 *Media surveys on feminism*

A recurring feature of the 'feminism is dead' debate is the media's interest in whether young women identify with feminism or whether they feel it is no longer relevant. This has led to journalists reporting on polls and surveys on the topic, generated by sources such as online parenting networks (Netmums and their rival Mumsnet) and Girl Guiding UK.

In October 2012, website Netmums ran a survey called: *Rise of the Modern FeMENist*<sup>5</sup>, with a sample of over 1300 women recruited via their website with the aim of finding out what feminism means to girls and women living in the UK in 2012. According to the findings of this survey, only 1 in seven women (14%) label themselves as feminist, with younger women being less likely to self-label (with only 8% of 20-24 year olds, and 9% of 25-29 year olds adopting the label). Among the survey's conclusions were the following statements:

The study starkly shows modern women feel traditional Feminism is no longer a label they feel proud to wear - it is seen as aggressive, divisive and doesn't take into account their personal

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<sup>5</sup> In relation to their decision to spell feminism as 'feMENism', Netmums (2012a) state: "New movement dubbed 'FeMENism' to reflect women's choice" (p. 1). Beyond this simple statement, Netmums do not explain who it was specifically who came up with the term 'feMENism', nor explain the reasoning behind their decision to present the word in this way (with ME emphasised in capitals).

circumstances. [...] While undoubtedly it's down to old fashioned Feminists for bringing society this far, now it's time for another radical change to let individual FeMEEnists find their own path which works for them and their family. [...] Whether a woman chooses to climb the career ladder and use a nanny to care for her kids, stays home 'baking cupcakes', or juggling the middle ground of part time work, her choice should be seen as a valid one which is respected and supported by society. (Netmums, 2012, p. 1).

A cursory glance through these conclusions (and indeed the preceding findings) raises some concerns. One could question whether this survey warrants any scrutiny due it being a non-academic internet survey. However, when Netmums published their survey's results on their website, various news outlets uncritically reported Netmums' findings accompanied by headlines such as: "Feminism is over...say women" (O'Grady, *Express*, 2012); "Just one in seven women describes themselves as 'feminist'" (The Telegraph, 2012); "Feminism – a spent force or fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" (Roberts, *The Guardian*, 2012); "Girls say feminism has lost the point" (Hamilton, *The Sun*, 2012); and "The death of feminism? One in three women say it's 'too aggressive' towards men and they don't need it anymore" (Harding, *Daily Mail*, 2012). The latter two of these news sources refer to the survey as a 'study' and 'research' respectively which lends it more credibility. The survey was also discussed on television shows *Loose Women* and *The Wright Stuff* (Salt and Caramel, 2012). The widespread media attention to the Netmums' survey seems to suggest that there is still interest in the topic of feminism's 'death' in contemporary Britain, as well as interest in young women's repudiation of a feminist identity. Young women's disidentification with feminism is a topic which still generates debate among news outlets and internet communities. Alongside the media lending credibility to the survey, the founder of Netmums Siobhan Freegard claims that "As the UK's biggest women's website with over a million women logging on each week, we are best placed to work out what young women want now" (The Telegraph, 2012, p. 1). The Women's Resource Centre (Gyte, 2012) contends that this assertion is insulting to women who fight for equality all over the UK and argue that Netmums is not well positioned to gauge the thoughts and needs of women in the UK. This is a sentiment I agree with and I would also argue that Netmums is hardly representative given it caters to a very specific demographic (i.e. mothers), thereby excluding women who are a) not yet mothers, b) are childless whether due to chance or happenstance (e.g. fertility), and c) are childfree by choice (such as due to concerns for the environment).

Curiously, Netmums, as well as both *The Express* (O'Grady, 2012) and *The Telegraph* (2012) made the claim that the survey revealed a "New movement dubbed 'FeMEism' [sic] to reflect women's personal choice" (Netmums, 2012, p. 1). What this claim is based on is unclear and it is queried by *The Huffington Post's* Louise Pennington who via a quick internet search could not find any evidence of the term 'FeMEism' being used by any other sources. Pennington (2012) also dismissed the term as pretentious, disingenuous and implying that the only person who matters is the individual woman. Blogger Squeamish Kate (2012) argues that this survey seems to be skewed towards the idea that "all women's problems can be solved with a bubble bath and a bar of chocolate" (p. 1). As Squeamish Kate notes, issues such as child trafficking cannot be solved by self-pampering and 'me time'. Similarly, *The New Statesman's* Hannah Mudge (2012) argues that the term reduces feminism down to simply 'choice feminism' and ultimately being about "me, me, me - whatever I think is good" (p. 1). Indeed, from my own perusal of the survey's webpage, I have to concur with Squeamish Kate and Mudge's points. Given the content and focus of many of the questions Netmums were asking, it is hard for them not to be accused of being superficial and tokenistic in their approach to feminism. In relation to this point, one of the questions in the survey was "*which of these activities is acceptable for feminism?*", and appears to have been followed by a list of tick box responses relating to various practices including among several others: dying hair with highlights; vajazzling; wearing false nails; botox; cleavage-revealing clothing; pole-dancing; wearing mini-skirts; and being a stay-at-home mother who bakes cupcakes(!). The survey write-up also seems to be couched in stereotypes of feminism as aggressive and divisive. Curious phrasing such as "now it's time for another radical change to let individual FeMEists find their own path which works for them and their family" and "her choice should be seen as a valid one which is respected and supported by society" (Netmums, 2012, p. 1) appear to construct feminism as a movement which does not respect women's choices or at least does not support individual women to make their own personal choices.

Pennington (2012) suggests that it is "quite telling that this survey came from Netmums and not Mumsnet, which has both a very active feminist community online, as well as grassroots activists" (p. 1). Pennington notes how Mumsnet (a rival parenting network) members have created campaigns such as 'We Believe

You'<sup>6</sup> and the 'Miscarriage Code of Practice' campaigns; whereas in contrast Netmums' version of 'feMEEnism' challenges nothing, celebrating choice at the expense of political action. Indeed, Mumsnet has several message boards in its "Talk" section dedicated to the discussion of feminism including a book club and a board focused on activism. Interestingly, a year later Mumsnet (2013a) ran its own survey on feminism (which presumably was run in response to their rival Netmums) sampling 2,034 of their members. Mumsnet's CEO Justine Roberts (WMW, 2015) expressed in an interview with Women Make Waves how "We've gladly put our weight behind this cause on many occasions" (p. 1) and how odd she feels it is for anyone (whether the average person or someone more in the public eye) to fear and reject the feminist label.

In contrast to the Netmums (2012) survey, Mumsnet have been arguably more transparent in how they presented the findings from their survey. The questionnaire structure and breakdown of statistics are clearly organised for any reader interested in scrutinising them, along with more clearly designed infographics such as pie charts being provided (Mumsnet, 2013b), and a breakdown of demographics such as sex, age and where participants live. The Mumsnet (2013a) survey asks members to compare their relationship with feminism before and after joining the online network. It also contains questions about how much Mumsnet has influenced: a participant's perspective on 'everyday issues'; their view on particular issues (such as domestic abuse); how well-informed they feel about feminist perspectives and their confidence in expressing feminist viewpoints. Finally, it asks whether participating in discussions about feminism on Mumsnet has led to any changes in their relationships, parenting, worklife, and/or voting behaviour.

According to the Mumsnet survey, 59% of the women who took part said they considered themselves to be feminist now (and 47% considered themselves to be feminist before joining the parenting network). Mudge (2013) considers these findings to be heartening in comparison to the Netmums' survey. Though Mumsnet's findings are presented more clearly than Netmums' were, there does appear to be at least one discrepancy in relation to question 8, which asks women whether they have changed various aspects of their behaviour as a result

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<sup>6</sup> A campaign with the goal of raising awareness of rape and sexual assault.

of participating in feminist discussions on the site. According to the infographic (Mumsnet, 2013b), 57% changed an aspect of their relationship with their partner, whereas the survey results page (Mumsnet, 2013a) says only 27% made this change. As Martinson (2013) notes, the survey results do not mean that all members of the Mumsnet network are feminists, but they do seem to suggest that online networks such as this and other social media are providing a platform for women to talk and listen to the views of others, as well as giving feminism 'new legs'.

### 2.2.3 *Rebranding feminism?*

Tied into the 'Is feminism dead?' debate, is the question of whether feminism needs 'rebranding'. This concern with rebranding feminism is fuelled by the media, in particular women's glossy magazines (which are concerned predominantly with fashion and beauty). Examples of this involve magazines such as *Stylist* and *ELLE* recruiting advertising consultants and tasking them with the 'challenge' of giving feminism a 'makeover' (Graham, 2010; Swerling, 2013). *Stylist* suggests that there is little consensus in the UK over what feminism means and that what it means to be a feminist today is confusing (Graham, 2010), and that the label has become a "dirty word" (Wignall, 2010, p. 35). Similarly, *ELLE* alleges that feminism is "a term that many feel has become burdened with complications and negativity" (Swerling, 2013, p. 1). There are some issues with media and marketing attempts at rebranding feminism which I will unpack, alongside discussing some examples of rebranding attempts made by women's magazines.

First though, I will provide some context. The idea of rebranding comes from the sphere of business, specifically marketing and advertising. Branding strategist Bernadette Jiwa (as cited in Exeter, 2013) explains that organisations generally go through the process of rebranding when they want to attach a different set of meanings to their product and change how people feel about the brand, and ultimately to get more people (or a different set of people) to buy into the brand. According to Camps (2011), a brand is more than just a logo for a product or service, it is unique, timeless and can be bought by a customer. She suggests that when people buy a product from a company (such as an iPad) they're not

just buying a product but also buying into the brand's (such as Apple) philosophy and aspirations. Alison Camps<sup>7</sup> spoke about this at the '[Re]Branding Feminism' conference which took place in March 2011 at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies in London. Here, she discussed examples of brand successes and failures and considered what we can learn from these case studies and apply them to better promoting the aims and ideals of feminism. Camps added a note that her discussion should not be taken too seriously and instead was hoping to provide some 'food for thought' on how feminism could be evaluated as a brand and provide a framework for thinking about how it may need to be 'refreshed'. However, I would counter this. Camps' claim does not hold much water, and however you look at it, it is still treating feminism as something that can be packaged and sold like a product, as well as trying to apply the principles of business and the market to what is a social movement. This I feel is an ill-suited match, but one that currently seems to be popular given the examples of rebranding I will recount later in this section, along with the examples of 'pop feminism' which have emerged in recent years (see 2.3.2).

Jackson (2011), who attended the '[Re]Branding Feminism' conference, ponders the practical applications of what was discussed and what is going to be done about presenting feminism to a sceptical, indifferent, or even hostile audience (though notes this is not what the conference itself was about, which was rather more about representations of modern feminism). Jackson believes any serious attempt to rebrand feminism would be 'madness' due to the way it is divided, pluralistic, and means many different things to many different people. However, she does argue that feminists could do a lot more to broaden representations of feminism and counter negative stereotypes. It is feminism's very division and fragmentation which Camps (2011) suggests is a problem for feminism, arguing that an effective brand needs to have 'coherent totality', as well as constituent parts which blend into a single 'brand personality'. I would argue against this though as I believe that diversity is good for feminism as it counters a state of quiescence through healthy debate of ideas. As society changes, so too does feminism. Camps also states that a good brand needs to be relevant to people's needs and desires, as well as being 'immediate', 'salient' and not 'too static'.

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<sup>7</sup> Alison Camps is Deputy Chairman of Quadrangle (a market research agency) and Marketing Director for Pride in London (an annual LGBT pride festival held in London).

Camps compounded this by arguing that feminism is 'stuck in the past' and is not seen to be 'current'. Camps also proposes that feminism needs to be not just theoretically relevant, but also practical and therefore useful to a person, though I would contend that this is ignoring feminism's rich history of activist work and campaigning. In addition, Redfern (2011) who also spoke at the '[Re]Branding Feminism' conference highlighted feminist activities (e.g. The F-Word, Ladyfest, Fem 08, Reclaim the Night) which have become an increasingly important part of the British feminist landscape in the early twenty-first century, but which have received little media or academic recognition.

Redfern (2011) was also critical of the concept of rebranding feminism, arguing that the notion sounds capitalist in nature and that the media have too narrow a focus in how they address feminism, which tends to be (middle-) classed and white. Redfern described the media's attempts at rebranding feminism as a cycle which usually involves magazines drawing upon negative stereotypes of feminism to call for the 'need to rebrand' and then invite advertisers to 'swoop' in to 'save' feminism under the presumption that only the application of marketing principles can make feminism appealing again. Redfern contends that these rebranding attempts are not only underestimating young women (by implying, for example, that women would only be interested in feminism if it is a cool fashion accessory), but can also be offensive (e.g. through urging young women not to 'worry' if they like make-up and fashion and 'reassuring' them that they can still be feminist even if they are not a lesbian). Aune (2010) is also critical of rebranding feminism, arguing that attempts at this tend to 'miss the mark' as feminism without any critique of sexism or the patriarchy is hardly feminism at all. Another issue with the concept of rebranding feminism is that, as Beusman (2013) argues, such attempts are usually based on rejecting the idea that feminists are 'masculine', angry, and aggressive, and this only serves to reinforce the patriarchal notion that women should never be any of these things. Thus, Beusman proposes that rebranding feminism is more about capitulating to the dominant culture, rather than challenging or changing. Some feminist writers such as Beusman (2013), Samhita (2013), and Kumar (2013) believe that the feminist movement does need to change in terms of it needing to become more inclusive of different groups of women (such as women of colour; women who are disabled; working-class women; and trans women). However, Kumar (2013) notes that while social media has made feminism more accessible to a greater



number of people, it has also enabled many misguided attempts to dilute the movement in favour of making it more mainstream (such as the 'We Are The XX' campaign and Vitamin W's {a women's media platform} campaign, both from the US) which she describes as being off-kilter approaches to feminism.

As well as in the US, there have also been attempts made in the UK at rebranding feminism. In 2010, *Stylist* magazine<sup>8</sup> ran an issue in June with "Are you a secret feminist? You believe in freedom and equality...so why won't you use the F-word?" emblazoned across the front page. In the headline article, Wignall (2010) queries why so many young women passionately and publicly reject feminism, even if they agree with notions such as gender equality. Wignall refers to such women as a "generation of secret feminists" (p. 35) and believes that it is now time for women to publicly acknowledge and recognise that feminism is still relevant and "not at all scary" (p. 35). This was followed by *Stylist* asking three advertising agencies to give feminism a makeover: TBWA London, Beattie McGuinness Bungay, and JWT (Graham, 2010). TBWA's approach involved trying to 'give' feminism a 'sense of humour':

We also wanted to dispel the idea that feminism is humourless. Its worthy and angry past is a turn-off for many women today. Our ambition was to reposition the movement as 'less grrr, more purrr' (as quoted in Graham, 2010, p. 36).

This involved the creation of posters and billboards with slogans such as "Can you catch feminism from toilet seats?" and "Will feminism give me hairy legs?" (p. 36), the latter of which was imposed over an image of a woman looking confused. Beattie McGuinness Bungay alternatively chose to adopt the approach of creating a 'must-have' fashion item in the form of slogan t-shirts displaying messages such as: "Miss Feminist", "Feminists get laid more", "Man-loving feminist" and "Hello-boys. I'm a feminist" (p. 37). The agency describes how they would then ask the 'right' celebrities to wear these t-shirts, in order to become walking adverts for feminism "physical embodiments of what it is to be feminist today – sexy, confident, empowered and fashionable" (p. 37). As far as Beattie McGuinness Bungay were concerned:

The task is to make feminism cool, sexy and something to be proud of. For us that meant getting beyond the intellectualism and transforming it into something we can all relate to. [...] Feminism only means something if it's personal to you, so by wearing the T-

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<sup>8</sup> A women's magazine distributed for free in city centres and in railway stations.

shirt, women will engage with what feminism means to them today, not just as a stuffy idea from the past. (as quoted in Graham, 2010, p. 37).

Finally, JWT opted for the approach of suggesting that it is the word 'feminism' that is the problem, not the ideals behind it. JWT proposed to rebrand feminism by hosting public debates to decide what feminism's replacement word should be. The aim of their campaign was to find a new 'ism' which denotes the same beliefs and ideals but does not carry the baggage the old term did (Graham, 2010). Readers of *Stylist* were encouraged to vote for their favourite campaign by e-mailing the magazine.

In November 2013, *ELLE* magazine launched its own attempt at rebranding feminism. *ELLE* state that they believe feminism is still important, but believe that it has an image problem (ELLE Team, 2013a) and is a term which has become burdened with complications and negativity (Swerling, 2013). According to Swerling (2013), *ELLE* magazine is continually engaged in a conversation about what feminism means and (she adds, more importantly) what it means to their readers. Lorraine Candy (Editor-in-Chief of *ELLE UK*) expresses how:

Feminism is an important issue for Elle readers. But we've learnt, through engagement with our readers via our website and social media, that young women are confused as to what it means and whether it is relevant to them. [...] I believe debate is the key and we are in a unique position to reach the very audience feminism should be helping (as quoted in Marketing Communication News, 2013, p. 1).

Similar to *Stylist's* rebranding feminism campaign, *ELLE* recruited three advertising agencies (Mother, Wieden + Kennedy, and Brave) to rebrand feminism, though in addition they paired each agency up with a 'leading feminist thinker' (ELLE Team, 2013a). Again, just like with *Stylist's* rebranding attempt, readers of *ELLE* were encouraged to vote for their favourite campaign via Twitter (Marketing Communication News, 2013).

Mother, was paired up with *Feminist Times*<sup>9</sup> and they came up with the 'Make Them Pay' campaign which is a website which addresses the gender pay gap and allows visitors to compare their earnings with their male colleagues (Swerling, 2013). Alex Holder, an Executive Creative Director who worked on the

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<sup>9</sup> At this time (July 2013) *Feminist Times* was a newly launched online feminist magazine, which became defunct a year later due to a lack of funding in July 2014.

'Make Them Pay' campaign, claims this campaign "gave women an actual reason for needing feminism" (Holder, 2014, p. 1). Wieden + Kennedy were paired up with *Vagenda*<sup>10</sup> who came up with the 'I'm a woman and...' campaign which aims to challenge stereotypes and expectations surrounding women. This campaign encourages readers to tear a page out of the November 2013 issue of *ELLE* magazine, and fill in the space which comes after the "I'm a woman and..." statement with their declaration of independence. ELLE Team (ELLE Team, 2013b) even provided their own examples for their online readers such as: "I'm a woman and...I'll make you a sandwich if you iron my shirt"; "I'm a woman and...I'll never apologise for working in women's magazines"; and "I'm a woman and...please don't call me 'hun'" (ELLE Team, 2013b, p. 1). Readers are then encouraged to post a picture of themselves holding up their declaration on Twitter or Instagram, accompanied by the hashtag #imawomanand (Marketing Communication News, 2013). Meanwhile Brave, who were paired up with teenage campaigner Jinan Younis (ELLE Team, 2013b), called their campaign 'Feminism is for Everyone'. This campaign involved a question-and-answer flowchart of the kind typically found in women's and girl's magazines, except that in the case of this one instead of ending with a handful of different possibilities (e.g. different identities, traits, etc), only one possibility is made available to the reader, that of 'feminist'. The flowchart begins by asking readers "Are you a feminist" (Nudd, 2013, p. 1) and then opens into different paths depending on the reader's response. Whenever a reader follows a path which rejects feminism, it leads them to a textbox with a fact or statistic about gender equality. Examples of facts include: "It's pretty extreme that £10,060 is still the average pay gap between men & women" and "Is it acceptable that last year 400k British women were sexually assaulted & 70,000 women raped?" Eventually the reader will be returned to the initial question via an arrow asking the reader "Is it time to think again?" (Ridley, 2013, p. 1). The aim of this flowchart is to convince women who do not consider themselves feminist to reconsider (Ridley, 2013). It is interesting to note that *ELLE* originally contacted UK Feminista to participate in this rebranding exercise, but UK Feminista opted out due to their belief that feminism does not need rebranding (Dunne, 2013).

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<sup>10</sup> *Vagenda* is an online satirical feminist magazine which was launched in January 2012.

*ELLE* followed this up with a debate on feminism on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2013 in London, the motion for this was: 'Does feminism need rebranding?' (*ELLE* UK, 2014). The *Vagenda*'s co-founders Rhiannon Lucy Coslett and Holly Baxter who were involved in both the rebranding campaign and debate supported the motion: "We should be making feminism mainstream. That should be at the top of our agenda [...] Feminism needs a rebrand; it has an image problem among younger girls" (as quoted in *ELLE* UK, 2014, p. 1). This opinion was also shared by Ruby Tandoh (a writer and a finalist on *The Great British Bake-Off*) "We need to make feminism less academic, more accessible" (as quoted in *ELLE* UK, 2014, p. 1). Not everyone participating in the debate agreed with the concept of rebranding feminism. For example, Kat Banyard (founder of UK Feminista) argues "Feminism isn't a product. You can't put social justice in a tin and sell it. What we need to do is tell the uncomfortable, audacious inspiring truth about feminism" (as quoted in *ELLE* UK, 2014, p. 1). Other criticisms were made of *ELLE* magazine's attempt at rebranding feminism by journalists and bloggers. Kumar (2013) states that despite *ELLE* magazine's attempt at rebranding initially sounding encouraging, it is an approach which primarily reduces feminism down to a saleable product in pretty packaging. Beusman (2013) expresses a similar view, feeling that while it is admirable of the publication to publicly embrace feminism, at the same time, it is unsettling to see feminism reduced to a brand. Beusman went further to even suggest that treating feminism as a brand which needs help from advertisers is troubling because "consumer culture doesn't do women any favors" (p. 1). Beusman argues that it is highly improbable that turning feminism into an appealing commodity will do much in the way of challenging the current extant structures of power. Dunne (2013) similarly notes that it is magazines such as *ELLE* who are usually part of the problem due to their exclusive focus on beauty and dieting tips. Indeed, Charlotte Raven (2013), Editor-in-Chief of *Feminist Times* describes how their first two campaign attempts (produced in collaboration with Mother) were vetoed by *ELLE* for being too anti-consumerist. Sanghani (2013) argues that if *ELLE* really is committed to feminism, then it should go further and do something bold such as scrapping air-brushed images of women and featuring more diverse models.

## **2.3 Pessimism: The decline of feminist politics and the rise of Feminism-Lite™**

### *2.3.1 Feminism declines and postfeminism blooms*

As shown in the previous section of this chapter, from the 1990s, through to around 2010, the belief that Western feminism had declined and fragmented was persistently reiterated by the media. According to Dean (2010), this idea still holds considerable sway. Alongside this the notion of loss is also invoked, as well as an implied melancholic longing for a return to a mode of feminist politics which Dean refers to as 'seventies' feminism. Dean refers to it in this way in order to capture the way that second wave feminism from the period of the 1960s to the 1980s has been retroactively constituted as having certain and specific qualities, including radicalism, authenticity, and purity. These pessimistic accounts (in the UK context) tend to 'look back' at British feminism as a particular entity whose time has passed and no longer exists (Dean, 2010). Dean suggests that some pessimistic accounts (such as by Siegel, 2007; and McRobbie, 2000) may be (unintentionally) reproducing a melancholic attachment to a very specific mode of feminist politics, one which is a clearly identifiable, single movement, that is autonomous from the state. What this results in is 'seventies' feminism being invoked as *the* paradigm of feminism, which according to Dean leads to contemporary feminist activism not being investigated in all of its complexity.

Pessimistic narratives not only voice concern over a quantitative reduction of feminist activity, but can also express dismay at shifts in feminist practice, goals and methods. Squires (2007) observes that feminism is no longer a singular and coherent movement, but rather a series of loosely coupled networks and provisional alliances. Dean (2010) notes that there appears to be some consensus that the autonomy and radicalism associated with second wave feminism has been lost due to institutionalisation, fragmentation and deradicalisation. For example, feminism has become institutionalised and professionalised as part of the academy. However, I would contend the notion that the institutionalisation and professionalisation of feminism should be cause for dismay and despondence. As Dean (2010) points out there have been increased opportunities for feminist influence in politics and equal opportunities legislation, and as Walby (2011) suggests this has resulted in greater influence

and improved co-ordination for feminist activity which I feel is surely a good thing. While I do recognise and empathise with concerns regarding the potential for feminist goals and activities to be subsumed by larger organisations (such as NGOs and trade unions), I would argue that the benefits of potentially being able to reach and support a greater number of women thanks to greater co-ordination and organisational capacity is more important, than trying to cling onto smaller grassroots approaches from a 'golden age' of feminism.

Tied in with the perception that feminist politics have declined to such an extent in the UK that they are no longer visible or are even non-existent, is the view that we are now in a 'postfeminist' era. In the early 1980s, the US media began to label young women as the "postfeminist generation" (Aronson, 2003, p. 904). Similarly, in Northern Ireland, Zalewski (2003) observes how readily the media has taken up the term "evidently ever happy to find ways to condemn feminism" (p. 119). Aronson (2003) suggests that this term continued to be used by the media in the early 2000s to refer to young women who were thought to benefit from feminist gains (such as access to employment and education), but were also not concerned with tackling discrimination or driving for political change. It should be noted, that Aronson is describing the US context here, and for comparative purposes, in the UK, the term 'postfeminism' appears to be less commonly used as a label for young women by the press, and instead UK news articles tend to be marked with a seeming preference for focusing on 'mothers' repudiating feminism. It is a term that has been subjected to debate since its conception, due to its usage by the media to connote the 'death' of feminism. In the academy, researchers such as Rossi (1982, as cited in Aronson, 2003) have used the term to refer to the current cycle and stage of the women's movement. Rossi identified feminist waves each being separated by approximately fifty years or two generations. She also identified 'quiet periods' which included reduced political action and advocates for progress focusing on private arenas and the individual. However, discussing postfeminism is not straight-forward. As Whelehan (2000) explains, prefixes such as 'post', 'new', and 'power' tend to be added to 'feminism' when the speaker wants to indicate a certain antagonism towards feminism (whether because of the term's negative connotations or because the term is viewed to be inadequate for a particular personal agenda), or because they want to imply feminism will be overhauled and given a new direction. Certainly the use of such prefixes 'muddy the waters' here, due to the way terms

such as 'liberal feminism', 'third wave feminism', 'consumer feminism', and 'choice feminism' (as well as the afore mentioned prefixes) are used interchangeably by writers to critique particular aspects of young women's and/or young feminists' practices and subjectivities.

In the early 1990s, several US women writers who became prominent and who referred to themselves as 'power feminists' (such as Katie Roiphe, Rene Denfeld, and Naomi Wolf) or as 'equity feminists'<sup>11</sup> (as was the case with Christina Hoff Sommers and Camille Paglia). These writers characterised older feminists as 'joyless', 'puritanical', and 'man hating'. For example, Roiphe (1994) asserts that feminism has caricatured women as humourless victims and Denfeld (1995) described feminists as being like Victorians in viewing women as chaste victims of predatory males. Whelehan (2000) recounts how in the 1990s, this iconoclasm was seen as healthy for feminism (e.g. McRobbie, 1997) with the view that this generational conflict is necessary for the new generation to establish their own identity and develop their own language for challenging gender inequality. I would suggest though that this view is being overly generous, to what is essentially a movement which is hostile towards feminism. As already mentioned, the adoption of prefixes such as 'power' attached to feminism tends to indicate antagonism towards feminism, or as I propose, could almost be characterised as a backhanded compliment (with terms such as 'hot feminist' cropping up over the years – for example, see 2.3.2) This serves to distance women from engaging with feminist politics, as instead they can adopt a position of the 'sensible', 'right thinking' individual who does not want to 'stir up' any trouble. Indeed, I feel this need to not 'stir up trouble' can be seen in Wolf's (1993) work such as when she proposes that men and women *are in fact* different due to the effect of hormones on behaviour (while conceding that evidence for this so far is conflicting). Whelehan (2000) acknowledges that the "straight-talking common sense of new feminists is assuredly attractive, and appears to make their work more accessible, but it tends to obscure their personal agenda in putting forward these ideas" (p. 85). Some more recent accounts (e.g. Nayak & Kehily, 2008) refer to power feminism's iconoclasm as postfeminism acting as "a signifier of a way of thinking and acting beyond the rubric of feminism" which "may imply some

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<sup>11</sup> Equity feminism is defined as a libertarian form of feminism. Proponents of equity feminism tend to pit themselves in opposition to what they refer to as 'gender feminism'.

critique of former orthodoxies” (p. 59). However, some such as Oakley (1998) argue that such writing by younger feminists in the early 1990s provides a potential space to examine when questioning why women may be resistant to feminism.

Oakley (1998) observes how writers such as Naomi Wolf (1993) have reconstructed second wave feminism as ‘victim feminism’. Second wave feminists such as Susan Brownmiller (1975) and Germaine Greer (1970) focused on conveying the idea of women as victims of men and patriarchy, and in the early 1990s, it was argued by Wolf (1993) that the conception of gender as based in the social sphere has provided an ‘excuse’ for women not to take responsibility for their oppression. Wolf’s main contention here is that viewing women as victims deprives them of agency, autonomy and responsibility and prevents them from ever becoming true equals of men. However, Wolf’s argument is problematic and controversial, as it places responsibility onto the so-called victims themselves. Whelehan (1995) argues that by exonerating men from blame, Wolf is instead blaming women for their current position (both materially and ideologically). Whelehan argues Wolf is constructing women as ‘too weak’ to resist the ‘beauty myth’ and is also placing the onus of responsibility for resistance onto individual women and away from men and even the media. I agree here with Whelehan’s assertion that individual resistance is ineffectual in making change for women.

As Whelehan (2000) notes, when Wolf (1993) wrote *Fire with Fire*, it was intended as a guide to ‘fundamental’ issues for young women in the early 1990s, and she had the aim of making it accessible to young women who felt their generation had no voice in the feminist ‘orthodoxy’ of the time. Young feminists such as Wolf and Denfeld consider second wave feminism has lost its relevance to young women and view the movement as prudish and humourless. For instance, Wolf (1993) argues that young women are ‘mature’ enough to handle sexist banter without the need for a ‘militant’ radical feminism. Whelehan (2000) criticises this as reinforcing anti-feminist stereotypes and as being reductionist in boiling down women’s rights issues to simply being about sexist jokes. Angela McRobbie’s (1997) view in the 1990s was that the main difference between older and younger feminists, was the latter’s use of populist language which was directed at ‘ordinary’ women, though this use of ‘raunchy’ language has been



critiqued as it does not, in itself, offer any radical social critique (Whelehan, 2000).

A key feature of Wolf's view of feminism, which she labels as 'power feminism', is her belief that feminism's primary role is to enrich the life of the individual woman through offering her the freedom to make personal choices. The notion of feminism emphasising social or ethical responsibility is almost absent from this version of feminism. Welehan (1995) argues that Wolf's reluctance to discuss collective activism and even radical change, renders her position as one which could be neatly aligned with liberal individualist discourse. Riordan (2001) argues that there is a tendency within politics of resistance to place an emphasis on individualised agency and that this is why resistance has become the favoured idiom of postfeminism with its focus on individual empowerment through 'casting off' the prescriptive codes of second wave feminism. As well as being criticised for its individualised focus, Wolf's version of feminism has also been castigated as being middle-classed and for marginalising the experiences of women from other backgrounds (Whelehan, 2000). This reflects my own concern with the middle-classed position of writers such as Wolf. Wolf (1993) goes further in her work to argue that 'victim feminists' believe women are inherently 'superior' to men, that women hold the monopoly on caring and nurturing behaviours, and in turn uses this claim to foreground her argument that this:

...belies the evidence of history and contemporary statistical reality. It denies the full humanity of women and men. And it recreates a new version of the old female stereotype that discourages women from appropriating the power of the political and financial world to make power at last their own.  
(p. 160).

Wolf even goes so far as to say that 'victim feminists' fear claiming power and are in denial that women are the ones who are now in power and "are in charge" (p. 19). So not only is Wolf putting the onus of responsibility for resistance onto individual women, she is also blaming women for not seeing that they 'are already' in a position of power. This view to me seems to be in denial of the privileged position that writers such as Wolf hold, and how many women are not so fortunate even in the West to be able to assert their 'power' or have their voices heard.

Similar to Naomi Wolf, in the late 1990s, Natasha Walter (1999) advocated a more individualised mode of feminism, by arguing for 'the personal' to be dismantled from 'the political' (an association which has arguably long been a central tenet of feminism). Walter asserts that feminism's slogan 'the personal is political' has led to undue scrutiny of the 'feminist quality' in women's private lives such as in relation to areas like beauty, fashion, and full-time mothering. Walter (1999) claimed that feminists imposed a 'dress code' or uniform and denied women the 'right to enjoy' the act of adornment. I would query though, where the evidence for this 'feminist dress code' lies and would suggest that rather than having any basis in feminist history, is another trope which has taken hold in the public mind in regards to 'militant feminism'. Whelehan (2000) contests Walter's argument, arguing that the slogan of 'the personal is political' was meant to show women that they were not alone in their experiences and that their personal experiences were relevant within the historical context of women's subjugation. Whelehan concedes that books such as those by Walter (1999) and Denfeld (1995) are important to the survival of feminism because these works are more accessible to young women, as well as appearing to speak to a new generation, but is concerned (as am I) with the way feminist history is being misremembered in such texts. Similarly, Budgeon (2011) states that while individual empowerment is an important and necessary element in transforming current social arrangements, it is not sufficient alone.

In a similar fashion to the power feminist reconstruction of second wave feminism as victim feminism, equity feminists such as Sommers (1994) reconstructed radical feminism as 'gender feminism'. Sommers argues that 'most' American women subscribe to the principles of equity feminism i.e. that women want "fair treatment, without discrimination" (p. 22) and proclaims that equity feminism is grounded in the Enlightenment principles of individual justice. She contrasts this with what she derisively calls 'gender feminism' arguing gender feminism is the prevailing ideology of contemporary feminist leaders and is underpinned by a radical and anti-establishment philosophy. In her writing, Sommers insists on demarcating the 'giants' of feminism (e.g. Mary Wollstonecraft, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton,) as being separate and different from second wave feminism. She also dismisses the claims of second wave feminists holding any continuity with first wave feminism. She bases this upon her argument that the first wave was founded on Enlightenment principles of

individual justice and that second wave feminism repudiates these principles and is underpinned by a radical, antiestablishment philosophy with roots in antiwar and antigovernment movements in the 1960s. Sommers positions second wave feminism as being completely at odds with liberal feminism (which she also refers to as 'the Old Feminism') and refers to Germaine Greer as an example of liberal feminism with her "fierce individualism" (p. 23). This claim seems almost bizarre, when taken in context. For instance, Greer (Sydney Opera House Talks & Ideas, 2015) states that: "I've always been a liberation feminist. I'm not an equality feminist. I think that's a profoundly conservative aim, and it wouldn't change anything" (01:06:04). Looking further back, Greer's (1970) seminal second wave work asserted that the consumerist and suburban nuclear family repressed women. Greer's argument here, I would suggest is completely at odds with Sommers' own position of libertarianism and seeming abhorrence towards the notion of 'the personal is political':

This "insight" into the nature of male/female relations makes the gender feminist impatient with piecemeal liberal reformist solutions and leads her to strive for a more radical transformation of our society than earlier feminists had envisioned.  
(p. 23).

All this is said quite sincerely, as though to say women *should* be satisfied with progress that can be described as 'piecemeal'!

### 2.3.2 *Emergence of populist 'feminism-lite'*

From the 1990s through to the 2010s, postfeminism has ascended to become one of the dominant logics of late modernity. It is a logic which celebrates individualised experiences of empowerment, and uncritically promotes a project of self-definition which is founded upon the values of freedom, choice, self-sufficiency, and individualised self-success (Budgeon, 2011). Kinser (2005) critiques such logic, arguing that consumerism for women is not necessarily feminism, that a choice is not necessarily feminist simply because it is a woman who has made the choice, and further that some choices are more compromising to women's lives than others. Similarly, Budgeon (2011) contends that just because an act is experienced by an individual as feminist, does not necessarily make it so. Choice feminism has been critiqued by feminists such as Budgeon (2011) for reducing down politics to simply being about the individual's right to

self-expression. I concur with both Budgeon and Kinser's concerns that choice feminism lacks any kind of critique of structural and systemic oppression, and instead boils down feminism to "let women do what they want" which may work for individual women residing in the upper echelons of society, but does not help women living in poverty, struggling with single parenthood, and/or residing in low-paid and low-status 'pink collar' jobs.

According to Budgeon (2011), the discourse of choice (as deployed by young feminists such as Naomi Wolf in the 1990s) continues to suggest that feminism places limits on women's ability to construct their own identities in ways which meet the needs of their personal circumstances. Certainly, echoes of this discourse could be seen in the Netmums (2012) survey discussed in the previous section of this chapter, wherein Netmums claimed their version of feminism (feMENism) is about reinstating the value of motherhood, allowing individual women to find their own path which works for "them and their family" (p. 1), and the importance of respecting a woman's personal choice as a valid choice – as though feminism does not already do any of these things! As Budgeon (2011) points out, a woman being able to make her own personal choice, does not necessarily stand as a form of feminist politics.

It has been observed by Kiraly and Tyler (2015) that in the 2010s, there has been an increasing interest in feminism due to the rising visibility of new feminist activities (which will be discussed in greater detail below in the next section of this chapter). There also appears to have been a shift towards celebrities and political leaders beginning to talk about feminism, with some even claiming the feminist label (Negra, 2013; Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). Kiraly and Tyler (2015) express concern that with this rising interest in "all things feminist" (p. xi), there has been an emphasis on promoting a populist brand of feminism which does not offend or overtly threaten existing power structures. They call this brand of feminism 'feminism-lite' or 'fun feminism' and argue that:

The mainstreaming of the feminist brand has left 'feminism' as little more than a sticker that anyone and everyone can now apply, largely because it has lost all sense of intellectual rigour or political challenge [...] Women's liberation has been reduced to a series of personal statements about whether women like or dislike particular aspects of themselves or their lives (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015, p. xi-xii).

Feminism-lite, places emphasis on choice, empowerment and the individual above all else. Kiraly and Tyler (2015) contend that this emphasis on

individualism has roots in liberal feminism whereby the possibility of freedom is believed to be within reach, if only women choose to claim it (echoing Naomi Wolf's claim that feminists are too afraid to claim power). They are critical of women's liberation being recast as an individual and private struggle, with no acknowledgement of the shortcomings of existing systems of power and privilege. A key problem of feminism-lite is the way it strips away context from the lives of women and assumes choices are made in a political and cultural vacuum (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). Kiraly and Tyler (2015) go further calling this the 'freedom fallacy' and argue that there can be no freedom or liberation for women whilst the only available choices are constructed on the basis of gross inequity.

One area of this era of feminism-lite which feminists have expressed concern over relates to how activities which were at one time held up as epitomising women's subordinate status are now being celebrated as liberating personal 'choices' (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). One example of this is Netmums' (2012) use of a woman's right to "be a stay at home mum baking cupcakes" (p. 1) throughout their survey report to emphasise the 'importance' of respecting women's choices. Other examples include the reframing of sexual harassment as 'harmless banter', pornography as sexual liberation, and sexual objectification (e.g. pole dancing or girls sending in topless images of themselves to lad magazines) as sexually empowering (Levy, 2005; Walter, 2010; Kiraly & Tyler, 2015; Whisnant, 2015). Whisnant (2015) suggests that a new form of feminism which:

*acquiesces* to certain key male entitlements, while simultaneously presenting itself as bold and liberated and rebellious, is likely to be appealing to many women. A version of feminism that supports girls' and women's desired self-conception as independent and powerful, while actually requiring very little of them as far as confronting real male power, will similarly have wide appeal. (p. 6).

According to Whisnant, feminism-lite lacks any critique of issues such as pornography and sexual harassment, and is instead more of a depoliticised 'faux-feminism' which caters to and does not challenge porn culture. She argues that an important implication of this is that the concern for feminism is no longer what a woman does, but whether she *chooses* to do it. While second wave feminists recognised the importance of taking responsibility for the broader implications and consequences of their personal choices, advocates of feminism-lite seem to suggest that what matters most is that a woman is able to authentically demonstrate that she has made her choice, whatever it might be, freely and independently. In contrast, Whisnant (2015) suggests that the fundamental

feminist question is not whether an individual woman 'likes' or 'chooses' a particular role or practice, but whether the overall *effect* of that role or practice maintains women's subordination to men.

The consumerist aspect of feminism-lite has also been noted by feminists as an area for concern. Tasker and Negra (2007) explain how postfeminism works to commodify feminism through the figure of woman as empowered consumer. The figure of the woman as pinup also features as an enduring linchpin of commercial beauty culture. Here, postfeminism provides new rationales for guilt-free consumerism and presides over the aggressive mainstreaming to middle-class women of expensive and elaborate beauty treatments. In late modern society, a woman's capacity to earn her own wage has become the symbol of ultimate empowerment (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). This means that postfeminist culture (such as television shows, films, music, books, and magazines) places an emphasis on women's freedom of choice when it comes to various aspects of their lives, particularly in relation to work, domesticity, and parenting (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Tasker and Negra (2007) describe how postfeminist culture tends to sideline economic disparities between women and fails to recognise that for some groups of women (such as working-class women), paid-employment is a necessity, not a choice, while many other women still are unable to obtain and/or sustain paid employment for various reasons (such as costs of childcare, caring responsibilities, illness, disability, lack of jobs and so forth). Postfeminist culture, for example seems to cling insistently to a notion that choosing to solely occupy the private and domestic sphere is an option that is both valid and widely available to women, though I would contend that for many women occupying 'pink collar jobs' (e.g. cleaning, caring, catering) it is less about 'choice', and more about factors such as an aggressive job market which still predominantly remains inflexible in relation to family-friendly hours for those such as single mothers. Postfeminist culture thereby becomes a site which is embedded in consumption as a strategy for the production of the self, and where social difference is glossed over (Tasker & Negra, 2007).

In more recent years, feminism-lite has manifested in the realm of books, with the apparent aim of making feminism not only accessible, but also fashionable, cool and even 'sexy'. This is very similar to the 'rebranding' exercises by glossy women's magazines discussed earlier in this chapter. Some recent examples

include Ellie Levenson's (2009) *The Noughtie Girl's Guide to Feminism* (adorned with a cover which emulates and evokes chick lit), Caitlin Moran's (2011) *How To Be a Woman*, and Polly Vernon's (2015) *Hot Feminist*. While trying to make feminism more accessible and less impenetrable to young women is an approach I find appealing due to my concern over young women's alleged repudiation of feminism, I do have some concerns in relation to the content of these particular books (Levenson, 2009; Moran, 2011; Vernon, 2015) which I will expand upon below.

As Walters (2005) attests, a crucial difficulty facing feminism in the twenty-first century relates to how academic feminism has developed a language which is impenetrable to non-academics. She believes that this can result in women feeling shut out of feminism and alienated from it. Walters contends that this is an issue which feminism ignores at its own peril and that in order for feminism to remain as something 'living' and evolving, it needs to reinvent itself, not just through finding new issues, but also a new language. However, the language of postfeminism, as Tasker and Negra (2007) highlight, draws its strength from a rhetorical field that produces buzzwords and slogans. These slogans tend to be expressions of energetic personal empowerment on the lines of "you go girl!", "girl power" and "you can do it!" (Tasker & Negra, 2007; Negra, 2013). Books such as Levenson's and Moran's have been criticised for not understanding feminism (Negra, 2013) and for simply being a "tepid call for women's right to make their own choices" (Aune, 2010, p.1). I would also critique Levenson's book for its simplistic approach to feminism, which again reduces feminism down to simply being a matter of choice "Being a feminist is what you want it to be" (Levenson, 2009, p. xviii). There is also the tendency for feminism-lite books to serve cultural demands for women to constantly appear upbeat, happy, with a 'can do' attitude and never angry. Indeed, Caitlin Moran (2011) in her own book advocates laughter as the solution to women's problems:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we don't need to march against size zero models, risible pornography, lap-dancing clubs and Botox. We don't need to riot, or go on hunger strike. There's no need to throw ourselves under a horse, or even a donkey. We just need to look it in the eye, squarely, for a minute, and then start laughing at it. We look hot when we laugh. People fancy us when they observe us giving out relaxed, earthy chuckles. (p. 14).

Moran goes on to suggest that people are not attracted to women when they are angry or shouting. I would also argue that these books patronise younger women

by frequently emphasising that if you are a feminist you can still be attractive, sexy and pretty too! Vernon's (2015) definition of a 'hot feminist' is a particularly pertinent example:

One who cares greatly about the way she looks and greatly about the rights of women, feels that neither is compromised by the other – would indeed go as far as to say each reinforces the other. [...] Her legs are probably shaved, her lips are probably by Mac, her wardrobe is on point, her wit is never diminished. She views her own intrinsic sexiness not as an impediment to her feminist politics – but, rather, as its rocket fuel. (p. 3).

A further problem with feminist-lite books is their tendency to constitute feminism as an unwelcome, implicitly censorious presence, with references made to the 'f-word' which underscore feminism's status as the 'unspeakable' (Tasker & Negra, 2007). It has been suggested by Tasker and Negra (2007) that it is feminist concerns which are the ones being silenced in postfeminist culture. They note that despite being accessible, examples of postfeminist culture such as feminism-lite books tend to lack a coherent account of gender and power, as well as serving to invalidate systemic critique. Negra (2013) describes how feminist-lite books are highly marketised, and tend to align with 'brand culture' through their celebration of the self. This has been epitomised by a recent trend for business self-help books aimed at women such as Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) *Lean In* and Bethany Frankel's (2011) *A Place of Yes: 10 Rules for Getting Everything You Want Out of Life*. Books such as these tend to emphasise choice, self-will, and a woman's capacity to self-improve through entrepreneurship (Negra, 2013). Books such as Sandberg's focus on encouraging women to make personal modifications in their lives in order to overcome challenges, and ignore the existence of structural barriers. Again, this goes back to Kiraly and Tyler's (2015) point about feminism-lite's emphasis on individualism and the positioning of freedom and success as being obtainable if women are willing to 'reach' for them. Negra (2013) contends that such messages are underpinned by an assumption that *all* women want careers in business and they also implicitly suggest that only 'certain' types of women are deserving of success.

Negra (2013) expresses concern that it is feminism-lite and business self-help books which are saturating the market and being read by young women, rather than academic feminist texts, due to feminism-lite books being more affordable for those on a limited income and more accessible (by virtue of their tendency to



being distributed in mainstream book stores and in the paperback format). Negra (2013) argues that voices such as Caitlin Moran's and Sheryl Sandberg's need counterbalancing with other feminist voices, a sentiment with which I agree. On the one hand feminism-lite books are depoliticised and uncritical in their approach to a consumerist-based feminism, and on the other, they can be coming from a position of relative wealth, privilege and power (particularly the business self-help books) which seem to be intent on telling women that they can easily overcome structural barriers through mere self-will and self-improvement. Negra proposes that feminist books need to be made easier to digest and access, suggesting that feminist scholars need to learn how to communicate in a clear and accessible way in order to enable this.

## **2.4 Optimism: New feminisms**

### *2.4.1 Third wave feminism*

An added dimension of complexity to the 'Is feminism dead?' debate relates to the status of feminism in the 1990s. Recently there has been talk about feminism being in resurgence during the 2000s and 2010s (e.g. Redfern & Aune, 2010; Cochrane 2013; Dean & Aune, 2015), and this seems to implicitly imply that feminist activity was in a phase of abeyance in the 1990s. Certainly looking back at the previous section of this chapter which discussed the pessimism narrative, there has been much made of young women's political apathy during the 1990s and this period was characterised as being in a postfeminist state. However, I would suggest that the state of affairs here was more complex, because although the picture often painted of feminism in the 1990s tends to be quite pessimistic, it could be argued that there was some resurgence in feminism during this period in the form of third wave feminism.

During the early 1990s activists like Rebecca Walker stood out and were seen as 'radical' in comparison to the rest of their generation which at the time was increasingly being perceived as politically apathetic and characterised as conservative in attitude (Siegel, 2007). Siegel outlines how 1992 saw a renewed interest in feminism, marked with a rise in memberships of existing women's organisations in the United States of America. Increasingly, these organisations

were focused on multi-faceted global issues such as opposing the Persian Gulf War as opposed to focusing on just equal pay and reproductive rights. In 1992, a conference called 'Women Tell the Truth' was held at Hunter College in New York. As part of this conference, feminist activists Rebecca Walker and Shannon Liss, who at the time were in their twenties proclaimed themselves to be third wave feminists. The term 'third wave feminism' was first used by Walker earlier that same year in a *Ms* magazine article and in which she asked young women to embrace feminism (Siegel, 2007). Since then the 'third wave' has become a term used to describe a period of feminist activity beginning in the early 1990s and continuing to the present day. However, what 'third wave feminism' actually represents is not a simple question to answer.

As mentioned previously, defining just what constitutes 'third wave' feminism is complicated. Much of the recent work on 'third wave' feminism, according to Dean (2009), has focused on unravelling the components that make up the 'third wave'. Dean feels that much of this work is problematic as it treats 'third wave' feminism as a discreet and identifiable entity which can be described in a simple fashion. As Coleman (2009) highlights, there are issues with designating different approaches to feminism as 'waves'. This is because initially, 'second wave' feminism was designated as such to emphasise continuity with earlier feminist ideas and to denote a sense of succession (Bailey, 1997). However, as Coleman (2009) points out, this sense of continuity and succession conflicts with the ways in which some 'third wave' feminists characterise the 'third wave' as being a distinct and deliberate break from the 'second wave's' priorities and agendas.

Jervis (2004) is critical of discourse treating the 'second' and 'third' waves of feminism as being dichotomous to each other. She points out how rarely similarities between the two waves are ever discussed. Jervis argues that this framing of feminist theory as being about generational differences between the waves serves as a 'disguise' for what are ideological differences. Jervis also highlights how writers in general frequently construct the 'second' and 'third' waves of feminism as binary opposites, such as stating that second wave feminists will not recognise the importance of pop culture while third wave feminists are overly focused on media representation. Kelly (2005) argues that third wave feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards (2000) are utilising such binary opposites when describing second wave feminists as 'stodgy' and as

lacking the confidence of third wave feminists. As Kelly (2005) highlights, many third wave feminist writers define themselves as being outside 'the academy', situating their work as being different from and frequently rejecting of, second wave feminist work.

As can be seen in this chapter, unpicking contemporary feminist activities including those of the 'third wave' are complex, and as Dean (2010) highlights, cannot be treated as being a simple undertaking. As defining third wave feminism remains a complicated process, unpicking the key debates which surround it can become problematic as well. In writings on and/or related to the subject, terminology can be used interchangeably such as 'third wave feminists', 'young feminists', 'new feminists' and 'postfeminists'. Due to this, the branch of feminism being discussed by writers is not always clear. Mackay (2015) observes how whenever the resurgence of feminist activism is commented upon by the media, it is often attached to young women and that this furthers a generational narrative which positions older and younger feminists as opponents. Mackay argues that generational attachment has: "led to the lazy assumption that all modern, contemporary feminist activism must be third wave if it involves young women or a new generation of activists" (p. 156). According to Mackay, third wave feminism tends to be used as a simple chronological reference point and also as a shorthand for contemporary or young feminism. In her own research, Mackay found that many feminist activists (in particular those identifying as radical feminists) reject the term, as well as any attempts by others to classify them as 'third wave' simply because of their age or being currently active in the movement. Instead, the interviewed feminist activists stated that their approaches to feminism have nothing to do with their age, but their politics. Mackay contends that the 'third wave' label is not generational but ideological with her interviewees connecting 'third wave' ideology with "glib, depoliticised, postfeminist claptrap" (p. 160) characterised by the reification of choice, and a pro-sex industry stance. I agree with Mackay's argument that we should view third wave feminism as based on ideology rather than a person's age, as like Mackay points out, there are many young feminist activists whose political standpoints are more aligned with the second wave. Dean (2009) also views the generational interpretation of the label as superficial and 'lazy'. He believes that thinking about the third wave in generational terms is problematic, as this then implies that the second wave of feminism is redundant and in need of replacing with a new and distinct mode of

feminism. This creates artificial divisions between groups of feminists and casts feminism as fundamentally a site of intergenerational conflict. Whisnant (2015) is also critical of the wave model of feminism, arguing that it tends to downplay feminist work between, throughout and independent of the 'waves', particularly by women of colour. Like Mackay, she also suggests that it wrongly implies differences between feminists is primarily generational-based rather than politically-based.

Like Dean (2009), I do feel the term 'third wave' has some limited usage, I would suggest that terms such as 'third wave' and 'fourth wave' can be viewed positively in terms of them contesting the notion that the feminist movement is no longer active. Such terms defiantly demonstrate that feminism is still active as a movement. However, overall I do find demarcating feminism in generational terms to be unhelpful, and believe that demarcating based on ideology (e.g. radical, liberal, Marxist) is more useful and easier to unpick. For the purpose of this chapter though, it is important to explore debates around 'third wave' and 'fourth wave' feminism as the aim here is to provide an overview of what is being said about feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

#### *2.4.2 A fourth wave? Vibrant renewal and growth in feminist activity*

While in the 1980s and 1990s, narratives of feminism's decline were dominant, the period from the late 1990s onwards saw the appearance of more optimistic accounts celebrating a range of new feminist practices (Dean, 2010). Dean (2010) outlines how optimistic accounts are articulated in a variety of ways, though points out that one common rhetorical strategy is to invoke notions of a break or paradigm shift from a moribund older form of feminism, towards a new, lively, vibrant, and contemporary feminism. Dean argues that while these optimistic accounts may on the surface appear to be in opposition to narratives of decline, they both share an emphasis being placed on a paradigm break between the old and new feminisms, and as a result both optimistic and pessimistic narratives emphasise break and discontinuity in the feminist movement over continuity. However, I would argue that the emphasis on a break from the 'old' feminism is more apparent in what is known as 'third wave feminism' which emerged in the early 1990s, rather than the most recent manifestation of

feminism which is beginning to be labelled the 'fourth wave'. This is due to the way in which third wave feminists tend to characterise the 'third wave' as being a distinct and deliberate break in continuity from the second wave of feminism (Coleman, 2009). I will discuss debates around both the third and fourth waves of feminism in more detail in the remainder of this chapter.

In their 'Reclaiming the F-Word' survey, Redfern and Aune (2010) explain that the (then) current state of feminism was one of the key issues highlighted by feminists. Participants in the survey expressed concern over media misrepresentations of feminism and stressed the importance of consciousness-raising among young women. A further concern was that while there have been many gains in regards to women's rights in the UK since the late 1960s, these have not been shared equally by all groups of women (Bryson, 1999). Bryson (1999) delineates a number of women's issues which are still pertinent in many (if not all) countries around the world today. For example, societal expectations that women will take responsibility for domestic and caring work (both caring for children and elderly relatives) which is not only largely unpaid and unrecognised, but is still rarely taken into account by employers of women in terms of work conditions (such as the lack of flexible working hours made available to working mothers). According to Bryson (1999), the story of women's rights is not one of simple progress, but rather is confused, uneven, erratic and even reversible, and it is therefore nonsense to suggest that we are now living in a postfeminist society in which gender equality has been fully achieved. Bryson contends that feminism remains critically important as both a political theory and a political movement. Indeed, there have been young feminists in the 2000s and 2010s, arguing that women still face inequality in every aspect of their lives and that feminism is still relevant and urgently needed today (e.g. Banyard, 2010).

Walby (2011) contends that feminism has not been dead, but very much alive and vibrant, though she believes it is less visible than it used to be. She argues that this is because projects aimed at tackling gender inequality are less likely in recent years to label themselves as feminist due to them existing in alliance or coalition with other social forces such as trade unions. As a result, such gender projects tend to use more generic labels such as 'equality', 'justice' and 'rights', and Walby (2011) suggests that this is partly due to pressure to avoid using a term which has become stigmatised. Walby (2011) also argues that new forms of

feminism are less recognisable as they no longer take the form of a 'traditional' social movement, in the sense that they are not consistent with older notions of feminism as a protest movement located outside of political institutions. Instead, in the present, feminist projects are being conducted inside state institutions (such as the European Institute for Gender Equality) and in non-governmental organisations [NGOs] (such as the Women's Budget Group). However, Dean and Aune (2015) contend claims that contemporary feminist activity lacks visibility. Indeed, according to Dean (2010), the late 2000s was an interesting time for feminist activism in both the UK and Western Europe. Dean identified a 'sense' among feminists at this time that 'something' was happening with regards to feminist politics and that this 'something' had (at that point) yet to be examined by academia. This 'something' refers to how in the UK, the mid- to late-2000s witnessed a significant increase in the visibility, influence and popularity of a variety of autonomous feminist practices (Dean, 2010). Redfern and Aune (2010) argue that it is a myth that young women do not care about feminist issues and that there are large numbers of women and men embracing and reclaiming feminism. Indeed, they believe that a feminist resurgence has been occurring since the early 2000s (though also feel that there is room to build on this resurgence and spread feminism to even more people). Both Dean (2010) and Redfern and Aune (2010) discuss examples of emerging feminist activity in the early twenty-first century. Examples of feminist organisations active in this period include: UK Feminista; London Feminist Network; Feminist Fightback; the Feminist Activist Forum; and Birmingham Feminist Network. There have also been examples of feminist campaigns either emerging or being resurrected during this period which are still active in 2018, such as: Object; SlutWalk; Ladyfest; Reclaim the Night; the Million Women Rise march; Pink Stinks; and Toys will be Toys. Not only was there a significant rise in new feminist activity emerging in the 2000s and into the 2010s, but this period also saw ongoing work by more established groups such as: The Fawcett Society; the Women's Resource Centre; Women's AID; Southall Black Sisters; Justice for Women; Rights of Women; Newham Asian Women's Project; and the National Alliance for Women's Organisations.

In the early 2000s there were new feminist 'zines' being produced and distributed. 'Zines' are magazines, which are independently produced and printed, have a small circulation and are usually focused on minority interests

such as feminism, politics or dedicated to fandoms based on specific television shows (such as *Doctor Who* and *Blake's 7*). In the UK, examples of feminist zines which were being published in the early 2000s included *Subtext*, *Lippy*, *KnockBack*, *Eve's Back*, *Wee Bissums*, *Trouble & Strife*, *Uplift*, *Herstoria*, *Gender Agenda*, *Race Revolt*, and *Desperate Living*. US examples such as *Bust* and *Bitch* are still being published today (while also maintaining an online presence). There has also been an increasing web-presence of feminism with weblogs. Weblogs (also known as blogs) are websites with frequently updated entries which can cover every day events in an individual's life to form a journal or be focused on a specific issue or topic such as feminism, women in science, or women in politics (Brady, 2005; Redfern & Aune, 2010). Some examples include: *The F-Word*, *Vagenda*, *XOJane*, *Jezebel*, *Rookie*, *Feministing*, *Racialicious* and (the now defunct) *Feminist Times*, as well as online communities such as *girl-wonder.org*, *Cybergrrl*, *Webgrrls*, *gURL.org* (also now defunct). Dean (2010) describes how the Internet has facilitated a spread of feminist blogging, as well as allowing the establishment of links between formerly disparate groups of feminists and individuals. In their discussion of feminists producing alternative media, Redfern and Aune (2010) suggest that this explosion of blogging activity stems from a feeling that mainstream culture does not represent you and so the only option is to create something which represents yourself. Dean (2010) suggests that new modes of feminist political activity (such as online communities and blogging) have emerged in response to a perceived gap between unequal gender relations on one hand and the mainstreaming of feminist concerns on the other. Dean explains that this mobilisation is centred around a collective belief that "the battle has not been won" (p. 4) and that there is still significant work for feminism to do. Dean (2010) delineates how much of this new feminist activism is focused on issues such as: violence against women; pornography; beauty; and women's sexuality. There has also been crossover between different mediums with several feminist bloggers and/or campaigners publishing books. For example: Jessica Valenti, the founder of the *Feministing* blog, has written/co-written several books on women's issues including *Full Frontal Feminism* (2007) which Valenti aimed to be an accessible primer for young women explaining why feminism is still relevant and needed; Kat Banyard, the founder of UK Feminista wrote *The Equality Illusion* (2010); Laura Bates, founder of the 'Everyday Sexism' project wrote *Everyday Sexism* (2014) and *Girl Up* (2016), the former of which includes many of the 'tweets' posted by women to the project, regarding their own

personal experiences of sexism; and Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Coslett, co-founders of feminist blog *The Vagenda* (2015), also wrote a spin-off book which focuses on women's media such as magazines and music videos.

All this new feminist activity which has emerged in the early twenty-first century, has begun to be referred to as the 'fourth wave' of feminism. While this 'fourth wave' has been articulated across a number of disciplines and sites of activism, the term is arguably even less clear than 'third wave' (Dean and Aune, 2015), and there has so far been very little critical work done on the fourth wave, perhaps due to how relatively 'novel' it still is (Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Phillips & Cree, 2014). So far, the 'fourth wave' seems to be characterised by feminists who use social media such as Twitter as part of their activism (Evans & Chamberlain, 2014; Munro, 2013). According to Phillips and Cree (2014), social media has opened up spaces for the re-emergence of feminist debates and activity, as well as making feminism accessible to a younger, more technology 'savvy' generation. Another feature of fourth wave feminism is that it is intolerant of all 'isms' and favours inclusivity of diverse sexualities and cultures (Munro, 2013). Munro (2013) argues that the 'fourth wave' reflects the current popularity of intersectionality as a theoretical frame for analysis, and suggests that tied in with this, the 'fourth wave' has created a 'call-out' culture where sexism, racism, disablism (and other 'isms') can be challenged. Phillips and Cree (2014) note how there have been several cases where specific events or cases which have been reported in mainstream media (e.g. rape threats against feminists such as Caroline Criado-Perez and Anita Sarkeesian) have led to social media spaces such as Twitter becoming 'battlegrounds' between feminists and others. Dean and Aune (2015) suggest that the status of feminism has been changing within what is a rapidly shifting socio-economic climate, which has been marked (in recent years) by an economic crisis, austerity, and a resurgence of far-right political groups. It is within this context, the term 'fourth wave feminism' has gained currency as a way of signifying new forms of feminist activism (Dean and Aune, 2015).



### *2.4.3 Lack of recognition of feminist activity*

It is argued by some feminists that rather than being in decline, feminism is alive and vibrant (Redfern, 2011). Feminist writers such as Siegel (2007), Dean (2010), and Dean and Aune (2015) discuss how there are currently growing numbers of new feminist organisations, festivals, websites and networking groups, but that these are not widely known about or discussed within mainstream media or even acknowledged by second wave feminists. As discussed earlier, Dean (2010) highlights how despite the range and variety of feminist activity emerging in the UK during the 2000s, there was little to no acknowledgement of this in academia and according to Mackay (2008) there was a surprising lack of research into the state of feminist politics during the 2000s. Dean and Aune (2015) note how feminism continues to occupy a marginal position within wider public discourse and as found by Pereira (2012), feminism is still subject to techniques of erasure and dismissal within academia. Pereira highlights as one example the absence of feminist themes, theories and concepts from sociology course outlines and textbooks. Feminist contributions, if covered at all, tend to be 'lumped' together under the 'gender' label and given a token chapter or lecture. In Pereira's (2012) interviews with university students, students described how feminist literature would be included in lecture materials only to be used as negative examples of academic research: "My experience of lecturers' relationship with feminist work [...] one of mentioning it but devaluing it, belittling it, showing that it's not entirely credible, more than direct and explicit hostility" (p. 292).

Some feminists have tried to explain this disconnect between the recent surge in feminist activity and the lack of recognition new feminist activity receives. Siegel (2007) proposes that second wave feminists are increasingly reluctant to acknowledge any interpretation of empowerment that they did not initiate themselves; while Evans and Chamberlain (2014) suggest that some second wave feminists may resent the calls for a 'new' wave of feminism. According to Dean (2010), older feminists who do not recognise the activity of young feminists tend to invoke retrospective longings for a return to a mode of feminism thought of as existing in the 1970s (which he refers to as 'seventies' feminism). 'Seventies' feminism is often positioned as a 'golden age' for feminism, and contrasted with feminism in the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, newer modes of

feminism are found 'lacking'. As a result of this, the voices of young feminists appear neither new nor radical. This view certainly seems to be supported by Evans and Chamberlain's (2014) findings from interviews with feminists, such as the following comment by one interviewee:

As far as I can see the third wave has not contributed much to the on-going aims of feminism – the key ideas are still those from the second wave. (Bristol interviewee) (as quoted in Evans & Chamberlain, 2014, p. 8).

What Evans and Chamberlain found in their research was that there is an assumption that the waves of feminism should differ from each other, and to some extent compete. They suggest that the 'identity' attributed to different waves, results in a 'rigidity' which prevents the foregrounding of similarity between waves, as well as cross-generational dialogue. Towards the end of the twentieth century, Bryson (1999) noted how many women all over the world were campaigning and working together to improve the lives of women, though these women were diverse in terms of their aims, methods and interests (for example: women working in refuges; establishing professional networks; or working in the sphere of politics). Bryson (1999) expounds that these diverse activities clearly do not constitute a united women's movement, though they all share a concern with improving the situation for women. She believes it is hardly surprising that feminism is divided over political priorities, methods and goals due to the complex nature, causes and consequences of inequalities between women and men.

Feminists such as Kelly (2005) have critiqued the approaches and methods of third wave feminist work. Kelly describes third wave feminist writing as being characteristically uneven, and as being a bricolage of anecdotes and autobiographical narratives rather than being based on any systematic analysis or interrogation of theory. Kelly (2005) feels that while autobiographical narratives and personal testimonies were central to the consciousness-raising projects and 'public speak-outs' during the 1960s and 1970s, and that there is nothing inherently wrong with using this approach as a platform for building theory on, it is however, important to move beyond the 'personal' and autobiographical. She argues that issues identified in personal narratives remain personal and problematic if there is no interrogation or analysis made which draws links between the individual and the larger structures of power, privilege and oppression. I agree with Kelly's argument here, as I too believe that the 'personal' and autobiographical should only be a starting-point in feminist work, with a

theoretical framework and critical analysis and interrogation building on this. Feminism needs depth, otherwise there is a danger of descending into the depoliticised 'feminism-lite' of Vernon (2015), Moran (2011) and Levenson (2009) which lacks any kind of 'teeth' or critique.

According to Evans and Chamberlain (2014), the Internet and new social media provide a space for multiple waves of feminist activity, as well as providing a means of participation for women who are otherwise unable to participate in activities (such as protests and meetings). They also suggest that the Internet could enable feminism to move beyond the academic/activist divide and allow for inter-wave dialogue. However, Evans and Chamberlain (2014) also note that there can be problems with new technology, for example, not all feminists may have the same levels of access to the Internet or the skills required to be able to effectively engage with it. I do agree that this is something which feminist groups using social media platforms needs to be aware of, particularly ones which require membership in order to access information (e.g. Facebook, Pinterest) as this could potentially exclude some women, but ultimately I do believe that technology and the Internet can potentially establish a more inclusive feminism as it can help overcome barriers such as cost and travel which could otherwise put women off from engaging with feminist activity.

As discussed earlier, Walby (2011) believes that the 'death of feminism' has been greatly exaggerated and argues that new modes of feminism go unrecognised because it has taken up new forms. These new forms include the way feminism has become embedded in institutions of civil society, the state and trade unions, such as the European Women's Lobby (who work with EU level institutions, providing information to decision makers to ensure a gender equality perspective is accounted for) and the UK Women's Budget Group (who engage with government departments such as HM Treasury on economic issues, producing annual analyses on the implications of the UK Budget on gender equality). Walby (2011) argues these new institutionalised forms are not often recognised as feminist activity by those who subscribe to a narrow definition of feminism as being limited to protest movements. Walby (2011) also believes that while less visible, feminism is no less significant when it forms coalitions with other social projects. She points out that projects which are feminist in nature but are not

explicitly labelled as such are often ignored by those who declare feminism's 'death'.

## **2.5 Summary of the chapter and final remarks**

Through this chapter, I have provided a review of the literature surrounding a debate that is highly relevant to this thesis: 'Is feminism dead?' and hoped to demonstrate the complexity of this debate. Newspapers have accompanied proclamations of the 'death of feminism' with reports of surveys which 'prove' that young women are no longer interested in feminism. One recent example was a survey by online parenting network Netmums (2012), which though clearly of poor quality is still problematic due to media reporting on surveys such as this, reproducing discourse that we are living in an era of postfeminism. Also of concern are the attempts that have been made to 'rebrand' feminism, which are underpinned by notions of business and marketing and treat feminism as a product which can be 'packaged' and 'prettified' to appeal (patronisingly) to young women today.

I then explored feminist responses to the 'Is feminism dead?' debate, which I noted as generally falling into two narratives: pessimistic and optimistic. Feminists who draw upon the pessimistic narrative believe the feminist movement has become less visible in recent years, as well as expressing concern that feminism has become deradicalised and fragmented. In parallel to this, feminists drawing upon an optimistic narrative have tried to counter the belief that young women are no longer interested in feminism, by celebrating a resurgence in the 2000s and 2010s of young women getting involved in feminist campaigns.

If feminism still has such a long way to go in terms of the struggle for gender equality, then why does it seem so many young women are reluctant to call themselves feminists? Are young women really resisting feminism? Do they share the same ideals and goals as second wave feminists or have they constructed their own? These are questions which the research seeks to address and ones which I will be examining further in the next chapter. In the next chapter, I will begin to examine questions around young women's

(dis)identification with feminism by looking at previous academic research which has investigated the issue.

## **CHAPTER 3 - RESEARCHING YOUNG WOMEN AND MEDIA**

### **3.1 Introduction**

#### *3.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of existing academic literature in relation to young women and media. While chapter 2 focused on providing context for this debate by reviewing discussions found in the media, and then examining feminist responses to this debate, in this chapter, a case is made for the three studies underpinning this thesis. I do this first by considering the question of why studying young women is of value in and of itself. I then move on to tracing shifts from youth studies with its predominant focus on young men and boys, to the emergence of girls' studies. In the second part of this chapter, I discuss the value of studying media and gender. In particular, this involves looking at the contribution feminist scholars have made to media and cultural studies and how prior to this, media studies tended to neglect gender. In the third part of this chapter, I return to the 'death of feminism' debate, but this time I focus on the specific angle of young women's relationship with feminism. This involves, first, discussing feminist theories and speculation over the reasons why young women purportedly do not identify with feminism and why this is of concern. This is then followed by an examination of different approaches to studying this topic empirically. This chapter then finishes with an outline of the aims of the research and the research questions.

### **3.2 Why study young women?**

#### *3.2.1 Feminist psychology: From 'otherness' to centring women's issues*

An issue in traditional psychology has been its androcentrism and its treatment of women as 'other'. Until the late twentieth century, the field of psychological research was dominated by men and therefore reflected their interests and concerns (Burr, 1998; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Furthermore, female psychologists conducting research on issues more pertinent to women's

experiences, have reported that their male colleagues do not consider their work as academically respectable or worthwhile (Burr, 1998).

While philosopher psychologists had for centuries paid attention to the nature of women, formal psychology was relatively slow in regards to take up of the psychology of women as a field of study (Shields, 1975). Shields (1975) proposes that this is because the psychology of women was considered to be a 'social' question and not within the remit of Wundt's 'new' psychology with its sharply defined limits. The remit of psychology in the early 1900s was the description of the 'generalized adult mind' and no clarity was provided as to whether adult referred to both men and women. By the 1930s, behaviourists focused on non-social topics of study such as learning and motivation and made no serious consideration of sex differences in their research. Behaviourists were focused on establishing universal laws which operated in any time and place. Instead, it was the field of psychoanalysis where the study of sex differences and women fell during the early twentieth century. According to Shields (1975), it was psychoanalysis which provided psychology with the first comprehensive explanation of sex differences. In 1922, John Dewey made the observation that (mainly male) psychoanalysts spoke of the psychology of women as though women were a universal unchanging entity, while at the same time psychoanalysts treated men as individuals who were subjected to structural and environmental differences.

One key aspect of mainstream psychology which has been critiqued by feminist psychologists is the way it has traditionally assumed both masculinity and heterosexuality to be the norm, and in turn it is considered that only 'otherness' (deviations from the norms) need to be studied. According to Burr (1998), in earlier psychological work, the male experience was assumed to be the 'standard' to which psychological processes of both sexes were compared. This resulted in women's experiences which differed to men's being obscured, particularly in studies where an all male sample was used, such as in Levinson et al.'s (1978) *The Seasons of Man's Life* which was a study of the stages of life-span development involving interviews with an entirely male sample. Other studies such as Kohlberg's (1969) work on the stages of moral development tended to pathologise women and found them 'lacking' in comparison to men. This androcentrism has resulted in traditional (or mainstream) psychology, both

as a discipline and in the way it handles gender, being subjected to critique from feminist psychologists. Mainstream psychology has even been labelled as 'malestream psychology' to emphasise its androcentrism (Burr, 1998).

Feminist critiques of mainstream psychology began to emerge during the 1970s, and came primarily from women based in the discipline of psychology. In reviewing this literature, Burr (1998) observes that while these women did not necessarily share the same theoretical allegiances, they all shared a concern with how women and men were being located within psychology, both in terms of being the subject of research studies, and in terms of being the researchers. Unger (1979) describes how at the time while many researchers had no interest (or confidence) in using sex as a major variable, a body of research had still built up in which sex was related: "tangentially to every conceivable phenomenon" (p. 1085) whereby any sex differences found were briefly discussed, while any identified similarities between men and women were dismissed or even left unnoted. Unger observes how there is no parallel field of sex similarities highlighting the numerous studies in which no differences between the sexes has been found. She proposes that the fact that sex differences are frequently used as an explanation rather than as a description, as well as the continued search for sexual differences (such as in relation to the central nervous system) suggests there are strong underlying and unexamined assumptions about the (unidirectional) biological causality of sex differences. Further, Unger considers it important to consider the question of whether the field of sex differences will continue to be an interesting one if fewer and fewer differences are being found by research. Tied in with this, she questions what the relationship between the psychology of sex differences and the psychology of gender is. Here, Unger points out how in the 1970s there existed psychologists who aligned themselves with one field to the relative exclusion of the other. One of the reasons why researchers interested in gender may not study sex differences is because: "The questions of sex differences are someone else's questions" (p. 1089) and because such studies do not shed light upon the mechanisms which create sex differences. Instead, Unger argues sex differences research tends to obscure the origin of differences between the sexes, typically through presenting biological explanations as sufficient and ignoring other possible causes.



The initial (seemingly obvious) solution to psychology's handling of gender and women was to simply recruit more women into study samples. This is sometimes derisively referred to as the "add women and stir" approach (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 15). However, the efficacy of this solution was limited because psychology was still underpinned by an arguably masculine conceptual framework. Simply 'adding' women into such studies, means trying to incorporate women's experiences into a masculine framework, inevitably distorting these, as well as reinforcing the notion of men as the 'norm' and women as 'other' and therefore deviant and pathological (Burr, 1998; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Instead, what was required was a more radical approach which would fundamentally challenge mainstream psychology, and this emerged in the form of feminist psychology. According to Hesse-Biber (2014), in the 1980s and 1990s, feminist researchers critical of the 'add women' approach argued that knowledge is achieved not through simply 'correcting' or supplementing mainstream research by adding women, rather it is achieved through paying close attention to the specificity of women's individual lived experiences. This led to two common themes emerging in feminist psychological research: 1. valuing women's experience and approaching it as a subject worth studying in its own right; and 2. a commitment to countering the prejudice, exclusion, and oppression experienced by women (Unger & Crawford, 1992). Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001) delineate feminist challenges of mainstream psychology as follows: 1) challenges to epistemology (psychology's assumption about what constitutes knowledge); 2) challenges to modes of enquiry (the methods psychologists use to gain empirical evidence); and 3) challenges to subject matter (the topics and issues psychology studies). Here, I will primarily focus on discussing the third of these challenges, though I will touch briefly upon the first two challenges here and will then discuss them in greater detail in the following chapter (in regards to the methodology employed in my research).

As already noted, mainstream psychology is underpinned by a masculine conceptual framework which meant it did not easily accommodate the inclusion of women and continued to be focused on 'male concerns' (such as leadership, achievement, motivation, intelligence, and problem-solving), while dismissing topics of more concern to women. One example, highlighted by Ussher (1989), was the dismissal of her research into menstruation by her male peers who questioned its status as 'real psychology'. Unger (1979) underlines how topics in

which men defined as the most relevant 'subjects of study' are also the same topics which until the late 1970s had received the most attention from psychologists. For example, the then higher number of studies on achievement and aggression, in comparison to nurturance and co-operation. Historically both the funding agencies handing out research grants and the panels on journals making editorial decisions over what to publish consisted almost exclusively of men (Spender, 1981; Sherif, 1987) and this resulted in research conceptualised from male concerns and male points of view being privileged and supported. According to Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001), in the 1990s this situation was slowly starting to change with a proliferation of research inspired by second wave feminism emerging. Topics of concern to women began to be increasingly studied such as post-natal depression, body image, eating disorders, sexuality, reproduction, and violence against women.

According to Unger (2010), the first courses on the psychology of women in the US were not part of the mainstream psychology curriculum and psychology of women was often a single unit taught alongside units on history, sociology, literature, and anthropology. There was also a lack of relevant and useful material in mainstream psychology journals for teachers to draw upon, making teaching the subject in the 1970s difficult at first. The first journal to be published in the US which was devoted to the psychology of women was *Sex Roles* in 1975, closely followed by *Psychology of Women Quarterly* in 1976. The *Annual Review of Psychology* published its first chapter on the psychology of women in 1975, and in the same year the Psychology of Women subunit in the American Psychological Society was formed. However, feminist academia is still arguably constrained; as Fine (2012) observes, there is still pressure on academics to secure funding grants and publish in 'top tier' journals which tend to be dismissive of feminist, critical race and postcolonial work. Fine suggests it is such pressure which discourages young scholars from engaging in critical work, and instead nudges them towards: "the well-accepted template of mainstream psychology" (p. 24). Indeed, this is something that was reflected upon by Tosh, Brodie, Small and Springings (2014). They argue that undergraduate psychology courses in the UK dissuade students from engaging with qualitative approaches to research, such as discourse analysis. Among these reflections, Small, for instance, recounts how as a third-year undergraduate her primary experience of research had been of statistical analysis and she was discouraged from choosing to do qualitative

research as she was told it was “unreliable” and less recognised than quantitative approaches:

Whilst feminism was something I had come across before, it wasn't until researching discourse analysis that I became aware of the issues within it [...]. Feminism was something that I had only ever really thought about before from my own personal perspective. (Tosh et al., 2014, p. 7).

The issue of mainstream academia ignoring women's issues and women's interests is not exclusive to psychology. It is also an issue in media and cultural studies and even in the wider culture. This is an area of interest for me as the first two studies of this PhD are media text studies examining media created by and for women. It is also something I have noticed myself in the wider culture, the way that women's interests tend to be dismissed and judged as being of lesser value than men's interests. Indeed, Douglas (1994) suggests that: “We wince at women's cultural history and seek to amputate ourselves from this pop culture past” (p. 5). Douglas notes how historical accounts of media and culture of the mid-twentieth century *still* focus on boys' culture, their music and their politics. What gets looked back on and celebrated as groundbreaking is boys' culture and its icons, while in comparison girls' culture and its icons are dismissed as silly, trivial, hysterical and mindless. Girls' culture in contrast to boys' culture, is still, according to Douglas, considered as having had relatively no impact on social change in the US:

Girls and women come across as the kitsch of the 1960s – flying nuns, witches, genies, twig-thin models, and go-go-boot-clad dancers in cages. None of our teen girl culture, none of what we did, apparently had any redeeming value at all. According to the prevailing cultural history of our times, the impact of the boys was serious, lasting, and authentic. They were the thoughtful, dedicated rebels, the counter-culture leaders, the ones who made history. The impact of the girls was fleeting, superficial, trivial. (Douglas, 1994, p. 5).

Douglas (1994) argued that we must reject this notion that popular culture for girls did not matter, as well as the assumption that it only consisted of retrograde images. In her book *Where the Girls Are* (1994), Douglas aims to reclaim a past which she believes has been too frequently ignored, dismissed and even ridiculed. She contends that through looking at media images of girls, we can “find the roots of who we are now” (p. 10) and this approach “excavates and holds to the light remnants of a collective female past not usually thought of as making serious history” (p. 10). I will further discuss arguments around the value

of studying media and women's consumption of media in the following section of this chapter (see section 3.3).

### *3.2.2 From youth studies to girls' studies: why study girls and women?*

Not only does my research draw upon psychology and media studies, it also crosses over with the field of girls' studies due to my interest in young women and media aimed at young women. Girls' studies has emerged, as a field in its own right, out of youth studies. In this section I will first provide some background on developments in youth studies before moving on to discuss the development of girls' studies and issues related to studying young women.

In the 2000s there has been a growing interest in issues of gender in relation to young people in the fields of arts, humanities and the social sciences. Nayak and Kehily (2008) believe the proliferation of research on gender and youth studies indicates the importance of gender as a conceptual category worthy of study. They also note how in the 2000s, childhood studies has become a recognised field of study and suggest that this is indicative of the increasing importance of examining childhood as a social phenomenon. As Nayak and Kehily point out, there are some interesting questions to be considered here around how childhood studies relates to youth studies and whether a young person is considered to still be a child. Terms such as 'children', 'youth', and 'adult' belie their complexity and discursive power, and in this respect childhood and youth can be considered as contingent constructions being made and remade over time. One key area of difference which can be discerned between childhood and youth relates to play. Research on children and/or young people tends to use the term 'play' to refer to children's activities, while youth are seen as engaging in leisure and subcultures. While the former is generally seen as creative, constructive and benign, the latter is often seen as potentially dangerous and disturbing.

When it comes to researching young women and girls, even defining what a 'girl' or 'young woman' is, is subject to debate. In particular, in terms of determining an age range:

...previously a fairly simplistic categorization of females between the ages of approximately 12 and 20 – has been complicated by both the “tweenies” phenomenon and the “Girlie” movement, which together “girlify” 7 year olds in midriff tops and 40 year olds with Hello Kitty barrettes. (Harris, 2004a, p. xx).

Research studies in the field of girls’ studies tend to use the terms ‘young women’ and ‘girls’ interchangeably to refer to the participants in their studies. Age ranges under study tend to vary, with some studies focusing on much younger (and narrower) age ranges such as 12-16, while others focus on wider age ranges such as from 16-40. Harris (2004a) suggests the category of ‘girl’ has proven to be slippery as well as problematic. This is because it has been shaped by norms about class, race, and ability which privilege certain categories (e.g. white, middle-class, able-bodied), while pathologising and/or criminalising others. This results in different groups of girls being the subject of concern or even panic at different times (Carney, 2000).

Nayak and Kehily (2008) note that much work on young people and gender tends to focus exclusively on either young women or on young men and they advocate a more integrated rather than segregated approach in studying youth and gender. Nayak and Kehily believe that separate sex studies which focus on the gendered subjectivities of either girls or boys tend to result in the privileging of one or the other of these identities by holding them apart. Instead, they propose a focus on the ‘practice of gender’ (p. 5) which moves away from notions of gender as a biological essence or a knowable category fixed upon the body. Approaches which focus on gender practices involve an understanding of gender as a lived process and aim to show how gender is a set of relations which are configured through bodies, technologies, spatial, discursive and material processes. Nayak and Kehily (2008) argue that viewing gender in this way shows how gender is ‘summoned into life’ (p. 5) through particular historical conditions and how it is discursively struggled over, repudiated or enacted, as well as placing attention on the production, regulation, consumption and performance of gender in late modernity. Through examining how gender practices are produced, regulated, consumed and performed, a greater understanding of gender can be gained. It also enables the interrogation of the relationship between gender and power and how gender is institutionally organised, embodied, transfigured and discursively constituted in social life (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Griffin (2004) however, contends that any contemporary academic and popular interest in girlhood must be

understood in a context where youth studies has tended to either ignore girls and young women, or treat them as marginal to boys and young men. I agree with Griffin here, as boys' attitudes and behaviours have long been the main area of concern in youth studies, as well as in relation to studying popular culture (Douglas, 1994; Griffin, 2004). Indeed, youth studies was referred to as 'boyology' in the early twentieth century. According to Griffin (2004), when girls did appear in youth studies, it was in the form of expressing a curious mixture of both anxiety and fascination with girls' sexuality and deviance. As already discussed in the previous section on feminist psychology, I believe it is important to centre women's issues and study topics of interest and/or concern to women. This is in part influenced by my experiences working in early years and primary education which tends to draw discourse around 'poor boys' suffering and struggling in school at the expense of girls.

In the mid-1980s, feminist researchers in the UK and US working with girls and young women were beginning to reconfigure girls as visible, central, and valued in youth studies (Griffin, 2004). According to Harris (2004a), while the appellation of 'girls' studies' is relatively new, the field of girls' studies has a strong transnational and cross-disciplinary history. Girls' studies emerged as a reaction to the lack of attention to issues of gender within youth studies and issues of age in women's studies. Harris describes how both the circumstances and experiences of young women had been systematically overlooked in research and policy until the late 1970s and early 1980s when feminist interventions developed. These interventions grew in different countries, and also out of various disciplines, coalescing into a loose thematic focus now referred to as 'girls' studies'. Among the disciplines which fed into girls' studies during the 1970s and 1980s were feminist psychology from the US and cultural studies informed by Marxist analyses developed at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies [CCCS] in the UK. While there was this initial continental divide in terms of conceptual frameworks, Harris (2004a) states that since then there has been a convergence of both in terms of knowledge and political research agendas. This shared framework is now what underpins the field of girls' studies. A key tenet of this framework includes the recognition of how girls' subjectivities are constructed at the intersection of gender, race and class. Some of the fundamental issues which girls' studies are concerned with include: the places and voices young women use to express themselves; the relationship between material conditions,

popular culture and gendered identities; the role of social institutions (such as school and the media) in shaping femininities; and the relationship between young women and feminism (Harris, 2004a; Griffin, 2004).

Ward and Benjamin (2004) recount how in the early 1990s, a series of academic studies in the US alongside several popular publications (such as *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher in 1994) identified a 'crisis' in girls' development. Some, such as Pipher's book identified strengths and skills which girls need to develop (and parents should instil) in order for them to be prepared to negotiate the 'dangerous world' of secondary education and adulthood. Another such example was a report in 1992 by the American Association of University Women [AAUW] which asserted there was a link between girls' psychosocial experience and their schooling. The report argued that girls' academic performance and career aspirations were linked to biased school practices, as well as girls' loss of self-esteem during adolescence. Ward and Benjamin note how at the time, the report stimulated public interest and even alarm, resulting in educators, psychologists and parents working to create school environments which would better support girls' educational success.

During the 1990s, girls' studies expanded, but also began to see a shift in the tone of discourse, from one which encouraged adults and institutions to help address girls' developmental needs, to one which centred the individual girl as the site of change. The implication here was that strategies and interventions became increasingly focused on changing the girl herself, rather than challenging institutions and society to change in order to meet her needs (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). This certainly chimes with Fine's (2012) criticism of the way neoliberal policy has been used by both the US and British governments to undermine the wellbeing of women through the recruitment of psychologists "to scrutinise them 'as if' they were the site of risk" (p. 23). Fine adduces that there has been an epistemological turn in psychology from macro-interests towards a focus on the individual. This shift, she argues aligns strategically with a political desire to make cuts to social programmes and redistribute responsibility, blame and scrutiny to the individual, in particular towards women. Similarly, Tavis (2002) suggests that the trend towards 'psychologising' solutions to children's developmental difficulties reflects a broader societal abdication of adults' shared responsibility.

She also argues that psychological solutions are appealing because it is easier to look towards individual change rather than institutional change.

Ward and Benjamin (2004) argue that it is important for researchers in girls' studies to recognise the way that girls' experiences differ, though it is also important not to let this obscure the commonalities among girls:

Since the mid-1990s, we have witnessed a pendulum swing from a discourse that depicts all girls as experiencing the same developmental crisis in the same way, to a discourse that depicts each girl's adolescence as her own unique hell, mediated or exacerbated by a host of social and demographic determinants. (Ward & Benjamin, 2004, p. 21).

Ward and Benjamin (2004) contend that while the contexts of girls' lives vary, it is important to recognise that all American girls are influenced by persistent gender bias in institutions and the ubiquity of US pop culture, and girls must negotiate these as they grow up. Ward and Benjamin refer to the popularisation of girls' studies literature as a 'Pyrrhic victory' as widespread popularity required the message be toned down, homogenised and de-politicised, particularly in relation to programs, books, websites and other merchandise aimed at girls and their parents which required a 'softer sell'. Such products focused on providing advice on raising girls and "celebrating everything girl" (p. 21). In contrast to earlier studies and interventions in the field which concentrated on strengthening alliances between girls and women the focus in the late 1990s was solely on girls' needs and the links between girls and women were severed. At the turn of the millennium, the American Psychological Association's [APA] Task Force on Adolescent Girls: Strengths and Stresses identified this shift from collective to individual solutions as a problem to be ameliorated (Roberts, 1999). The APA Task Force argued that by focusing on 'fixing the girl' to the exclusion of 'fixing the culture', the systemic problems underlying individual girls' developmental concerns become glossed over and hidden.

The roots of this shift in discourse from the collective to the individual, can be found in the American tendency to view the individual simultaneously as problem and solution, as well as in the predominance of mainstream psychology and its focus on the individual which contributed to theory-building about girls' development (Ward & Benjamin, 2004). Griffin (2004) describes how feminist researchers such as Valerie Walkerdine have challenged taken-for-granted narratives of developmental psychology which depict girls as being constituted



through socialisation processes. Instead, Walkerdine argues that there is nothing 'essential' about girlhood, rather it is always produced and negotiated by everyone, and in particular by girls themselves, in particular historical and political moments. In formulating this view, Walkerdine drew on feminist poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and cultural analysis.

As pointed out by Griffin (2004), most girls' studies research has focused on (usually white) women in First World contexts and this has resulted in debates and discussion revolving around the lives of Anglo-European (particularly English) and Anglo-American young women. Indeed, in the 2000s and 2010s, much girl's studies research is based within the context of the US, UK, or Australia. Griffin (2004) argues an Anglocentric perspective has remained pervasive in contemporary girls' studies and this perspective does not reflect the diversity of girls' lives, nor the complexity of the contemporary constitution of girlhood. Griffin emphasises that if girls have long been invisible in youth studies, then some girls are more invisible than others. She elucidates how in contemporary girls' studies, the 'modern girl' is represented predominantly in Anglocentric terms and is constituted in direct contrast with 'traditional' girlhood, or with girls living in 'traditional' cultures. 'Modern' girlhood is strictly located in the First World and is associated with Western cultures, and constructed as 'civilised' and 'progressive'. In contrast, 'traditional' girlhood is linked with girls of colour, both within and without Third World contexts and is seen as 'anti-feminist' and 'restrictive'. Griffin argues that the tendency to associate 'traditional' girlhood with the Third World serves to marginalise girls of colour who are living and/or born in First World countries. Griffin contends that it is absurd to constitute all girls as oppressed in an undifferentiated way, and is equally ill-advised to represent girls from particular groups (e.g. Muslim) as living lives which are unrelievedly restricted. Banet-Weiser (2015) outlines how since the turn of the millennium, there has been an exponential rise in Girl Empowerment Organisations [GEOs] in the US. US-based GEOs began to materialise at the same time as the theme of 'empowering girls' grew as an international development discourse. She explains how girls have been marked by development organisations as being 'powerful' and 'privileged' agents of social change, and even constructed as solutions to world poverty and international development. These efforts to empower girls take place within a context of commodified girl power and neoliberal entrepreneurialism whereby girls are constituted as productive economic

subjects. Banet-Weiser argues these GEOs: “provide market logic for commodified empowerment, and target an imagined feminine subject who is both in crisis and a powerful consumer” (p. 182). Banet-Weiser refers to this as a ‘market for empowerment’ where empowerment itself becomes a commodity. GEOs target an ‘imagined subject’ who is typically constituted as an ‘at risk girl’ who lacks resources, is typically subject to poverty and/or is a girl of colour. ‘At risk girls’ are often located by GEOs (such as Africaid) as being from the Global South and are constructed as victims of poverty and poor education. Banet-Weiser argues that GEOs such as Africaid tend to simultaneously embody a humanitarian and imperialistic narrative, whereby girls in Third World countries become represented as objects of charity by the West with the potential to become active global subjects.

### **3.3 Why study media and gender?**

#### *3.3.1 Value of studying media, consumerism and gender*

As discussed earlier, feminist psychologists’ have critiqued ‘malestream’ psychology for being male-biased in relation to themes, theories and methodologies, and similar critiques have been made of communication, media, and cultural studies. In the 1980s and early 1990s, communication textbooks (e.g. McQuail’s *Introduction to Mass Communication Theory* published in 1983) and journals (such as *Media, Culture and Society* and *European Journal of Communication*) made little to no reference to ‘feminism’, ‘women’, ‘gender’ or ‘sexuality’ (van Zoonen, 1994). van Zoonen (1994) notes how in the revised 1987 edition of McQuail’s book, a single paragraph describing feminist content analysis had been added. Dervin (1987) argues that feminist scholars have the potential to contribute to communication studies by being able to bring a ‘female’ viewpoint; while van Zoonen (1994) suggests that there are still some areas in media studies where it is important to ask “how about women”? (p. 15) and consider including women and/or issues of concern to women in research.

Douglas (1994) claims that as a professor of media studies in the US, she is working in an academic field that the media (such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *CBS News*) mock and dismiss as an ‘easy option’ in comparison to studying

fields such as history or science. Indeed, not only can feminist scholars in media encounter their work being dismissed, feminist research on media can also receive hostility from the public. For example, Finding (2010) recounts how her analysis of the character of Vicky Pollard from BBC television sitcom *Little Britain* received many vitriolic comments from readers online. Finding identified several different ways in which the comments she received function either to silence the researcher or diminish the research. For example, readers often complained that media such as comedy shows are not for analysis and that scrutinising them 'spoils' things for viewers who enjoy the show or dismissed studying media as a waste of time and money, saying that there are 'more important things to worry about', advocating that Finding find something more 'useful' to do with her time. Finding suggested that such comments may reflect issues in the general public's understanding of how research is conducted and funded, particularly in non-science disciplines. I can empathise with Finding's experiences here a little, as I have noticed a tendency towards hostility or dismissiveness in online public reactions to research involving gender and media. In regards to my own research, I have encountered dismissive responses querying when I was "going to get out of academia" and "get a proper job" in the private sector. Such encounters as mine and Finding's also lead me to suggest that there is still a trend towards silencing feminist work even in the 2010s. van Zoonen (1994) describes how journalists, students and colleagues from academia alike tend to narrowly construct feminist cultural critique as rigid and austere. van Zoonen suggests this is linked to the assumption by non-feminists that a feminist viewpoint on the media will inevitably be a "univocal, confident and unswerving denunciation of popular culture" (p. 1) and therefore narrow. van Zoonen (1994) suggests that many non-feminists tend to assume that feminism is univocal because this makes things easier and less complicated and can therefore provide some sense and direction to cut across complicated issues and debates.

Douglas (1994) argues that the reason media studies is caricatured and dismissed is that if enough people believe studying media is a waste of time, then the power and influence of the media are simultaneously downplayed. Douglas also suggests this absolves the media of any responsibility in the way it represents social groups (such as women):

They get off the hook for doing what they do best: promoting a white, upper-middle-class, male view of the world that urges the rest of us to sit passively on our sofas and fantasize about

consumer goods while they handle the important stuff, like the economy, the environment, or child care. (Douglas, 1994, p. 11).

Douglas (1994) argues that if it is important enough for television studios and advertisers to spend millions of dollars on creating media (such as adverts and sitcoms) then it is important enough for us to study and analyse. Similarly, feminists such as Magezis (1996) argue that understanding how the media works could enable women to find ways to affect it and make changes. I agree with both Douglas and Magezis here. Media covers a broad spectrum of outlets and platforms which reach a massive audience. It seems absurd to argue that the media has no power or influence over viewers, in particular younger viewers. The fact that so many advertisements continue to be produced for platforms such as television and the cinema suggest they are worth examining. Penneck-Speck and Fuster-Marquez (2014) refer to television advertising as a core persuasive genre alongside political and religious propaganda, noting how more money is spent on TV commercials than any other form of advertising. Press (2011a) makes some good points regarding the importance of feminists studying media. Press explains that due to the hybrid nature of feminist media studies, this means not only are feminists analysing cultural phenomena, but also critically engaging with the political impact of cultural phenomenon on women and other oppressed groups.

In the early-to-mid-1990s, van Zoonen (1994) suggested that culture and representation had become key battle grounds for feminism, while Barrett (1992) observed among feminists a growing interest in culture. Barrett defined culture as the processes of symbols and representation and believed that understanding these processes would lead to a better sense of subjectivity and the self. Though van Zoonen does note that (in the same way that not all feminist research is cultural studies) not all cultural studies research is feminist, and there are some sub-fields of cultural and media studies which feminist researchers tend not to study, such as media production, telecommunication policy, new information technologies, and media and citizenship. van Zoonen (1994) notes that while feminist media studies still occupies a relatively marginal position in the field of media studies, there are two themes of interest to feminist scholars which have gained more prominence in the wider field: stereotypes and gender socialisation, and ideology. Press (2011a) posits that in the UK, the study of media has strong connections with critical social sciences resulting in critical work being carried out

in relation to postfeminist media. She contrasts this with the academic context in the US which tends to be more celebratory and enthusiastic.

Magezis (1996) argues that the media has a very powerful influence on how women are seen and on how women see themselves and therefore it is important for us to understand how women are represented in media. She argues that media images can play a strong role in defining what is valuable in a woman's relationship with others and in understanding herself. Magezis explains how often, media images (e.g. the 'servile housewife', and the 'goody goody schoolgirl', the 'exotic seductress' and the 'princess as victim') do not reflect the 'reality' of women's lives but construct an idealised image of femininity and these images are used by people to judge women. The media usually reflects the dominant values, expectations and norms of a society, though the media can also influence society's values. Davies, Dickey and Stratford (as cited in Magezis, 1994) argue that the media tends to present capitalist, male-dominated society in a positive light in order to make it look like the best system. This requires the media to convince those who are less privileged that the problems and barriers they face in their lives cannot be changed, or that they are due to other forces (such as immigration). Douglas (1994) highlights how the media has raised generations of girls, through the way it has socialised, disciplined, comforted, and entertained young female viewers. She also stresses how for generations growing up after World War II, the media has had unprecedented influence with consumption of mass media becoming the primary activity within the home. Douglas argues that while women have been exposed to contradictory expectations in regards to their gender roles since at least the nineteenth century, this exposure has intensified since the late 1940s (at least in the US) due to an increasing array of technology and outlets for dissemination. In addition to the increasing ubiquity of the media, the media during the 1950s was undergoing a period of change in terms of how audiences were regarded and marketed towards. As young women had become more important economically as a market, they began to be segmented as a distinct market to target and advertise to (Douglas, 1994). In the context of the UK, second wave feminists were encountering new challenges that first wave feminists had not needed to contend with – a world dominated by the media. By the 1960s and 1970s, women were being bombarded with representations of women on a daily basis by a variety of media outlets including television, radio, newspapers, cinema, and billboard

advertisements. Feminists began to critique media studies' 'blind spot' in regards to the dimension of gender. As was the case happening with psychology during this period, feminist media researchers were encountering the 'male as norm' problem whereby women were rendered as invisible and men were taken as representing the human population as a whole (Gill, 2007a).

### *3.3.2 Researching media and gender*

Research questions focused on the construction of gender and the uses of gender within media texts (such as magazines) can be examined through the use of feminist media research. Feminist media research can provide a method of delimiting, analysing and explaining the power and significance of patterns of gender within mediated texts (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2014). As noted earlier, feminist media studies has a strong relationship with cultural studies, with both sharing several features including that they are self-reflexive, interdisciplinary, collaborative, and politically engaged (Stabile, 2011). According to van Zoonen (1994) and Gill (2007a), the study of gender and media is extraordinarily heterogeneous, meaning the field consists of various methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives, epistemological commitments, as well as different understandings of power and of how media images relate to individuals' sense of identity and subjectivity (van Zoonen, 1994). McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) expound on how all feminist media theories share the key tenet that the mainstream mass media functions through the dissemination, repetition, and support of central ideas. These central ideas are accepted by the culture in which the media item (under study) is produced. As McIntosh and Cuklanz note, this means that studying representations of gender in mainstream media texts can help with understanding the dominant ideologies of the culture the media texts originate from. Entwined with this is the way the content of media in a particular culture can shift over time, thereby indicating important shifts in dominant ideas within that culture. This means feminist media research is not only interested in analysing and deconstructing the notions of gender expressed in media texts, but also in the process of change and cultural shifts these media texts exhibit. Furthermore, feminist media research tends to be underpinned by a commitment to social justice and contributing to understandings of the operations of power exhibited within media (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2014).

Researchers studying media use pre-existing data which is already publicly available in written or audiovisual form and can be sourced in printed copy, electronic, and broadcast media forms. These secondary sources cover a vast range of media formats including, but not limited to: newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, bulletin boards, movies, radio shows, television shows, documentaries, advertisements, textbooks, public information leaflets, political speeches, and parliamentary proceedings. Some sources may even be available in more than one format, such as newspapers which more commonly exist both in print and online formats in the early twenty-first century (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), secondary sources from the media are ideal for addressing representation and construction-type research questions. Media sources can be viewed as fragments of popular culture and researchers study these fragments in order to understand the meanings which make up the 'social reality' shared by members of a society (Braun & Clarke, 2013). McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) state that any media text can be the focus of feminist media research if it has something to say about any of the following: intersections of gender, sexuality, class and race; constructions of gender; gender and relations of power; and gendered characterisations of people. In my own research, I am interested in the media text forms of women's magazines and feminist blogs, which I will discuss here. I will also briefly discuss zines as a potential media type for study, though as I will explain in chapter 6, there are methodological reasons why this form of media was not used in my research.

### *3.3.3 Studying women's magazines*

As part of this PhD's research, Study 1 involved identifying and examining the discourses made available in magazines and the subject positions these discourses offer to young women. The decision to analyse magazine articles for Study 1 was based on magazines being a widespread medium with generally large audiences. As Johnston and Swanson (2003) point out, the sheer pervasiveness of magazines warrants their attention for analysis. Indeed, magazines have drawn the attention of feminist media studies since the 1970s (Gill, 2009). Gill (2007a) suggests that magazines form a substantial part of our media landscape and are an enduringly popular medium. They are also seen as

a key source of cultural ideas about women and men (Gill, 2009). Women's magazines also usually present highly seductive images and contain discourses which communicate cultural expectations to the audience (Johnston and Swanson, 2003). According to Gill (2007a), magazines are a major part of the media landscape and are consumed by people of all ages from childhood, through to adolescence, adulthood, and old age. Gill notes that magazines in the early twenty-first century, represent an enduringly popular medium, the appeal of which has withstood the appearance of new media forms (such as radio, television, the Internet) over the decades. Gill attests that the popularity of the medium is demonstrated by 1) the increasing numbers of businesses (such as supermarkets and cinema chains) producing their own magazines; and 2) newspapers becoming more like magazines and/or converting into magazines (e.g. *Times Educational Supplement* which converted in 2011 to a magazine format).

Magazines can be devoted to a specific hobby or interest, a stage of life (e.g. childhood or old age), or a gender-based identification (Gill, 2007a). Nayak and Kehily (2008) detail how magazines in the contemporary period are predominantly aimed at a female market and can be delineated into different categories. There are magazines aimed at adult heterosexual women (which can be further divided into weekly and monthly formats), magazines aimed at teenage girls (ranging from those aimed at pre-teens, to those targeting late adolescence), and magazines focusing on what are referred to as women's interests and hobbies (such as craft, knitting, and cooking at the more practical end of the scale, and spirituality, astrology and pop psychology at the other end).

Women's magazines have been of interest to feminist researchers over the last few decades. Much research on women's magazines by feminists have been critical, identifying them as a locus of ideological messages which serve to both legitimise and naturalise unequal gender relations. Research has identified magazines as offering a narrow and restrictive template of femininity constituted by fashion, beauty and 'bagging a man' (Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2000). There are several features of interest which women's magazines share (Gill, 2007a). One is their tendency to address their readers as equals and friends through adopting an intimate tone. Another is the way they construct and offer different versions of femininity and are also constructed in opposition to masculinity (such as through



focusing on the shared pleasures and labours of femininity). Women's magazines also tend to adopt an individualist language which advocates personal solutions, rather than collective and political ones (Gill, 2007a). As magazines' profits come predominantly from the sale of advertising space (and only a small proportion comes from the cover price), magazine publishers need to attract as many advertisers as possible. According to Gill (2007a), magazine publishers do this through creating content which attracts the 'right' kind of readers. The 'right' kind of readers are ones who can be offered to advertisers in order to entice them to spend their money on this particular magazine rather than on another. Magazine publishers are able to report to advertisers that their readers trust the magazine and turn to it for advice on which fashion, beauty and hair products to buy (Gill, 2007a). Gill delineates how in some cases this desirable readership can represent a specific niche (such as people passionate about a particular hobby or interest), but usually the most sought-after readers are young, aspirational, and upwardly mobile with disposable income. As part of the relationship between magazine publishers and advertisers, magazines provide an environment which is conducive and sympathetic to the advertisements being run (Gill, 2007a). In addition, magazines also sell the friendly and intimate relationship they have developed with their readership. For example, Condé Nast, the publisher of *Glamour* claim their readers trust the magazine and turn to it for advice in regards to which hair, beauty, and fashion products to buy. As Gill (2007a) points out, this means magazines offer an environment which is conducive and sympathetic to the advertisements they run. McCracken (1993) argues that due to this sympathetic environment, the boundaries between advertisements and editorial content is blurring and as a result the reader will not experience adverts as interruptions.

There have been many studies conducted by feminist scholars on magazines aimed at women and/or teenage girls. In the 1970s, McRobbie's (1977, 1978) classic study into UK teen magazine *Jackie*, identified romance as a prominent theme with 'great moments' of romance iconography (such as 'the proposal', 'the engagement ring', and the 'wedding day') appearing in all the magazine's stories. Based on her analysis, McRobbie believes that *Jackie* is preparatory literature for a career of femininity, rather than a feminist one. According to Gill (2007a), this version of femininity (focused on finding and 'keeping' a man) which McRobbie identified in teen girl magazines of the 1970s has been superseded by a focus on

pop, fashion, beauty and celebrity 'boy-watching' in contemporary publications. van Zoonen (1994) observes how in the mid-1990s there was a shift towards asking what women do *with* media rather than what media does *to* women. This moves the focus towards questioning why women actively seek particular types of media over others. A particular sector of the magazines market which has been under scrutiny by feminists are magazines aimed at teenage girls and pre-teen girls. Ostermann and Keller Cohen (1998) argue that magazines are powerful ideological instruments. For example, Ostermann and Keller Cohen believe teenage girls' magazines naturalise heterosexuality as being a 'normal' part of all young women's lives. Griffin (2004) criticises such magazines as representing contemporary girlhood in the UK as being overwhelmingly white and slim, which operates to marginalise other possible ways of being a girl. She points out that magazines aimed at girls tend to have very few representations of girls from minoritised ethnic groups, girls with a disability, or girls who identify as lesbian or bisexual. Griffin argues that the problem with these magazines is not simply the lack of diversity of girls' lives being represented, but rather the way in which they render a variety of subject positions of 'girlhood' as unsupportable and incompatible with the position of being a 'normal girl'.

In the 1980s, feminists such as Ferguson (1983) argued that because magazines were predominantly consumed by women they set the agenda for the "female world" and created a "cult of femininity and heterosexual romance" (as cited in van Zoonen, 1994, p. 35). van Zoonen (1994) is critical of such perspectives in feminist media studies arguing that they position the readers of magazines as blindly accepting of the messages found in media or as having been 'brainwashed', while feminists are positioned as being 'enlightened' and seeing "through the tricks the mass media play on them" (p. 35). van Zoonen (1994) argues this dichotomy is problematic because if feminists reject women's genres it can appear they are also rejecting the women who enjoy them. One example of such media research can be found in the work of Janice Radway (1984) who studied women readers of romance novels. Radway surveyed and interviewed a group of women from a town she referred to as 'Smithton'. Radway found that for the women, reading romances created a time and space in which they could be entirely on their own, rather than being expected to be available to service others. The women interviewed defined a 'good romance' as one in which the hero initially appears intensely masculine, but is later revealed to have an affectionate

and tender side who expresses his love and devotion for the heroine. Radway elucidates that while there are elements in the practice of reading romance which can resist the patriarchy (such as the 'doting hero' embodying a masculinity which is more responsive to a woman's needs), she argues that even if fantasizing about a sensitive man addresses a 'real problem' (such as how the patriarchy does not allow for a more nurturing masculinity), this does not challenge nor address the patriarchal structures which interweave family and human relations and leaves them largely intact. Further, Radway considers that reading romance novels may even consolidate existing gender relations.

Saukko (2003) refers to early resistance research such as Radway's as "critical contextualist". Firstly, because such research takes a 'critical' view of resistance by scrutinising both its creative and 'futile' aspects. Secondly, because it is underpinned by a focus on 'context' which involves evaluating the value of resistance against its effect on 'reality' (such as gender roles or educational structures) and ability to change structures of oppression. Saukko suggests that the problem with critical contextualist studies of resistance is their presumption that the scholar is in a position to make judgements about the 'authenticity' of the participants' oppression or the 'utility' of the participants' attempts at resistance (such as by the Smithton women). According to Saukko, even if the scholar posits that participants' actions are meaningful, this is also accompanied by the presumption that the participants themselves do not 'really' understand the meaning of their actions, and therefore it is up to the scholar to 'discover' this meaning. Saukko contends that this position is problematic because "It presumes that, whereas the 'people' are under the spell of cultural hegemony or ideology (such as sexism), the scholar is able to 'see' this reality clearly and correctly" (Saukko, 2003, p. 44). Saukko (2003) goes on to argue that this kind of attitude does not cultivate any critical self-reflexivity in the researcher and, therefore renders research blind to how media scholars' notion of 'real' structures of oppression are usually heavily ideologically mediated, with roots in their theoretical and political commitments informing the research. Ang (1996) is critical of Radway's distinction between 'real' oppression and 'imaginary', arguing that this has led to Radway overlooking what specifically drives the women to read romances (e.g. titillation) and Radway belittling the pleasure women derive from romance novels. However, I do ultimately align myself with Gill's (2008) arguments regarding the relationship between women and media. Gill observes a

shift in the 2000s towards regarding Foucauldian-influenced work as 'too totalising' in their accounts of social relations and as producing a 'patronising' model of the subject as either: a victim of false consciousness; a cultural dope; or as a governed 'docile subject'. Gill queries what has led to the current climate in which simply: "acknowledging cultural influence is seen as somehow disrespectful, and when being influenced is regarded as shameful rather than ordinary and inevitable?" (p. 435). I agree with Gill's (2007c) assertion that young women make choices *within a cultural context* and that it is naïve to ignore the multitude of powerful interests at work in promoting products and practices (such as in relation to beauty practices). Gill makes it clear that adopting this view does not mean positing a top-down domination by a 'conspiratorial' group of magazine editors, advertisers and cosmetic companies working deliberately to oppress women. Nor does holding this view mean that a feminist researcher sees herself as 'elevated' above other women (i.e. above being 'duped' by media). This position holds that *all of us* are enmeshed in these matrices of power. A key point I feel Gill makes here is that power works in and through subjects by structuring a person's sense of self, and by constructing particular kinds of subjectivity, and not through some form of crude manipulation.

### 3.3.4 (Not) studying feminist zines

Giroux (as cited in Harris, 2004b) observes that when young people speak, their voices tend to emerge on the margins of society in spaces such as underground magazines (or zines), alternative music, and other subcultural sites. Many young women are using these alternative spaces to engage with their peers, develop their own critiques and become reflective, critical agents. These spaces may also enable young women to organise together away from regulation and the gaze of adults (Harris, 2004b). Zines are self-written/designed and photocopied publications and tend to be distributed via mail or are handed out physically face-to-face (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2004). Zines can take the form of a personalised newsletter and/or forum and are a communication medium which grew from radical Do-it-Yourself [DIY] philosophies with their emphasis on individuals as producers rather than as merely consumers of media. Harris (2004b) describes how in the early 1990s, zines which were produced and consumed by young women who referred to themselves as 'grrls' began to

appear. These zines provided a space for these young women to articulate their anger and politicise the category of 'girl'. These 'grrl' zines were by, for, and about young women who were interested in alternative, underground, feminist and punk politics. Such zines focused on issues affecting young women such as sexuality, self-esteem, violence, and unemployment. The purpose of grrlzines was to provide spaces for creativity and productivity (such as comics, poetry, collage, and art) which are self-generated and self-controlled, rather than commodified (Harris, 2004b). Kempson (2014) states that feminist zines form an important part of the communication network of the current DIY movement in the UK. Kempson outlines how scholarship on feminist zines tends to fall into two distinct analytic approaches. One is where zines are viewed as representing the opportunity to challenge the messages of mainstream media. The other approach challenges this 'resistance' view and instead favours viewing the zine creators as being motivated by a desire to communicate a version of the self, rather than a desire to enact resistance. Interestingly, Hesford (1999) proposes that zines are paradoxical feminist writing spaces due to the way their creators negotiate with and appropriate not only feminist discourse, but also discourses from the dominant culture (e.g. neoliberal discourse). Hesford argues that zines are critical sites for the construction of social identities and are marked by the aforementioned interplay of dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses.

Kempson (2014) describes feminist zines as independent, not-for-profit publications which are circulated via subcultural networks. Kempson suggests that zines comprise an important part of the UK's current DIY movement's communication network. Ferris (2001) defines zines as 'resistive texts', and Schilt (2003) argues that zines represent an opportunity for girls to counter the messages disseminated via mainstream media. Similarly, Duncombe (2008) describes zines as positioning themselves against a consumerist society. Kempson (2014) considers that while there is some value in noting the potential of zines to act as forms of resistance, this can be problematic due to how this positions zines in binary opposition to mainstream media. Some scholars (e.g. Poletti, 2003; Sinor, 2003) prefer an alternative approach to understanding the zine movement as one which re-imagines zines as a product of lifewriting and views the zine movement as being motivated by not necessarily a desire to enact resistance, but instead to communicate a version of the self.

### 3.3.5 *Studying feminist blogs*

With the increasing availability and accessibility of the Internet in the mid-1990s, electronic zines (or e-zines) and websites made by young women began to appear on the World Wide Web. At the time, these young women often became known as gURLs<sup>12</sup>. From this point onwards, young women's use of the Internet expanded rapidly, with women creating their own online spaces such as discussion groups, listservs, e-zines, blogs, and personal home pages (Harris, 2004b). Unlike traditional media, online media do not possess easily delineated boundaries and so the user experience can vary for each person who visits a particular online space (McIntosh & Cuklanz, 2014). Takayoshi, Huot & Huot (1999) suggest that the Internet operates as a kind of 'clubhouse' for girls, while Leonard (1998) describes the Internet as being a public space where young women can talk without having to disclose any personal details. As Harris (2004b) notes, this means the Internet is an interesting 'in-between' space as it can be both intimate and public simultaneously, thereby allowing young women to organise and communicate with others, while avoiding regulation and the risk of surveillance. The Internet also provides young women with the opportunity to create an online space without having to go through mainstream, commercial, corporate, official, (and even adult) channels. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2004) argue this makes a difference in terms of shifting the locus of political activism, as well as who can produce politicised cultural-technological objects.

According to Hillier (2001), the Internet "has until now been free of the surveillance that in the real world creates invisibility, hostility and frustration for this group" (p. 126). However, I would suggest this is sadly not quite the case anymore, due to the way the Internet has evolved since the early 2000s. Due to new technologies and software developments in the early-to-mid 2000s, many online spaces now allow audience participation such as adding comments, offering ratings, uploading, sharing and/or reposting content. Earlier examples of such spaces include discussion boards (forums) and mailing lists, while more recent examples include social media platforms (such as MySpace, Facebook,

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<sup>12</sup> A play on Internet term URL [Uniform Resource Locator] (also known as a web address) which refers to web resource and specifies its location on a computer network and is a mechanism for accessing it.

Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest) and community spaces within which users can upload their own created content (such as DeviantArt, Daily Motion, and YouTube). Such changes to the Internet have been accompanied by an increase in what Jane (2014) refers to as 'e-bile'. E-bile can include cyber bullying, 'flaming', 'trolling', sexualised threats of violence and other forms of 'recreational nastiness'. Jane observes how e-bile tends to have a gendered dimension and be constituted with gender stereotypes and sexualised aggression.

McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) describe how over time, feminist media research has accumulated to build up a record of the historical development of various genres of mainstream media (in relation to gender and relations of power). However, they point out that when new media texts are created, frameworks of analysis need to be retested and adjusted, and so media research can never fully keep up with the pace and scope of change which takes place in the realm of the media. I feel this point is particularly pertinent in relation to the media text choice for the second study discussed in this thesis: feminist blogs accessed via the Internet. Originally, the second study of this PhD was going to involve the analysis of feminist zines due to the way this form of media appeared to be flourishing in the 2000s with several new zines emerging during this decade. However, by the 2010s, many of these zines had either folded for financial or personal reasons, or shifted to online spaces transforming into blogs.

The growth of the Internet in the early twenty-first century has enabled the creation and dissemination of a tremendous variety of online spaces, thereby creating new spaces for feminist study. As McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) highlight, traditional media (such as magazines, newspapers, and television) and online spaces are different in the way that the latter are created, developed, and maintained by women for the purpose of expression, exploration and connection. As a result, online spaces tend to address women's issues in ways traditional media tends not to. Harris (2010) opines that online media production needs to be viewed as an increasingly important site where young women are enacting political agency, as well as blurring the line between producing and consuming media culture. Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2004) draw upon the analogy of Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in which the history of women's writing is linked with non-aristocratic women's access to a separate, private and

safe space. Reid-Walsh and Mitchell (2004) propose that by constructing their own website (or weblog), a woman or a girl is able to obtain a “room of one’s own” (p.174), a semi-private space of creativity and sociality which blurs the boundaries between production and consumption. Interesting to note is Reid-Walsh and Mitchell’s comment about the use of ‘guest book’ features on websites and how interaction between website owners and visitors is limited and/or indirect. They discuss how websites created by girls can ‘unsettle’ the division between private and public spheres, something which Foucault considered inviolable. It is a private domain where a girl can express herself creatively.

Reid-Walsh and Mitchell’s (2004) point about online spaces created by girls unsettling the division between public and private is interesting because since the late 2000s, there has been a rise in what is known as ‘Web 2.0’. Web 2.0 is a loosely defined term which refers to practices on the Internet, which centre around interconnectivity and interactivity of online content (Kawashima, 2010). O’Reilly (2005) compares Web 2.0 with the previous period of the Internet (now retrospectively referred to as Web 1.0) by highlighting the shifts from personal websites to blogging, from *Britannica Encyclopaedia* to Wikipedia, and from publishing to participation. Web 2.0 requires interaction and collaboration *between* web users, or ‘mini-creators’ as Kawashima (2010) refers to them. Kawashima (2010) explains that ‘mini-creators’ are not professional writers, artists, film makers [etc], but ‘ordinary people’ who spend their free-time producing material (such as photographs, collages, videos, pieces of art, comics, stories, fan fiction, etc) for Web 2.0 websites such as YouTube, Deviantart, fanfiction.net and more. Kawashima (2010) argues this new surge in ‘user creativity’ is revolutionary, as not only has the base of creators expanded, but the mode of distribution has changed too as now both creator and consumer can cut out the centralised control of dissemination (such as publishers, record companies, etc). This distribution is also no longer unidirectional with the lines between creator and consumer becoming ever more blurred (Spurgeon, 2008).

One way in which weblogs (or blogs) demonstrate their usage and value is in relation to activism, protest and resistance. Harris (2004c) recounts how in the late twentieth century, youth citizenship was reinvented as consumer power and young women have become emblematic of this. Social rights are no longer guaranteed and instead have become dependent on the individual’s resources



and their capacity to create opportunities. Many services and utilities once provided by the state have become privatised or outsourced. Young people are required to enter into successful 'customer relations' and make 'consumer choices'. According to Harris (2004c), many young women experience the conflation of power with consumption as deeply problematic, as this new mode of enacting citizenship is only feasible for those with the financial capacity to choose. As a consequence, youth activism and politics has shifted towards addressing the issue of young women being positioned as powerful citizens only when they consume. According to Harris (2004b), young women involved in resistance and protest are curtailed by the positioning of the 'consumer citizen' as one of power and voice, something which they find as questionable and therefore do not wish to engage with. Harris (2004b) observes how young women who are involved in activism acknowledge the increasing complexity of protest under corporate globalisation. For example, slogans and forms of protest are frequently absorbed by marketing and advertising industries. As a result, young women in activist circles have sought out alternative means of raising their voices by creating new kinds of communities and spaces for communication, debate and participation (Harris, 2004b). Examples of resistive spaces being created by young women include zines, websites, blogs, and 'culture jamming'<sup>13</sup>. This 'silencing' of voices that do not conform to the 'consumer citizen' model and the need to fight for spaces in which to self-express is hardly surprising. As Kawashima (2010) discusses, 'mini-creators' are not discussed in government or cultural policy discourse. Rather, government prefers to support corporations by strengthening intellectual property rights (such as copyright), thereby positioning 'mini-creators' as 'irrelevant' and even as 'enemies'. One example of this in the USA, is the Stop Online Privacy Act [SOPA], which is being referred to by its opponents as an 'internet censorship bill' which if passed would provide powers for blocking websites and removing them from search engines if they infringe copyright. I am concerned about the potential passing of this Act, which could constrain online spaces for creativity and would affect content on websites such as YouTube, Deviantart, and fanfiction.net as they consist of a lot of material

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<sup>13</sup> 'Culture jamming' refers to various techniques which involve material from consumer culture (such as billboard advertisements) to undermine its messages and power. For example, slogans or icons can be tampered with so their meaning is changed and any inherent illogic is exposed (Harris, 2004c).

such as fan fiction, fanart, fanvids, fan films and reviews of films, television shows and video games.

Like zines in the recent past, the Internet has become central to the creation of new spaces by activists. Internet websites such as blogs can act as places for personal expression and/or political participation, demonstrating a need and a desire for a space where women can express themselves outside of the places currently available to them (Harris, 2004b). This need coincides with the rise of Web 2.0 social networking and micro-blogging. As stated in the section on feminist zines above, there has been an increasing shift away from producing zines towards online communities, blogs (particularly on platforms such as WordPress and Blogger), groups/profiles created within social networks (such as Facebook and Google+) and micro-blogging sites (such as Twitter and tumblr).

### **3.4 Identification with feminism**

#### *3.4.1 Speculation and concerns*

While things have certainly improved for women (such as increased opportunities in employment and education, the Abortion Act 1967, the Equal Pay Act 1970, the introduction of full statutory maternity leave in 1988) there is still a long way to go for feminism. There are still many issues of concern for feminists including equality and flexibility in the workplace; access to affordable childcare; improved health care for women; and violence against women (National Organisation for Women, 2009). If feminism still has such a long way to go in improving the rights and lives of women, then why does it seem so many young women are reluctant to call themselves feminists? Do they share the same ideals and goals as second wave feminists or have they constructed their own? These are questions which the proposed research will seek to address.

Hercus (2005) elucidates how in the 1970s and 1980s, feminists were interested in the 'click' phenomenon. 'Click' refers to that first moment when a woman recognises their own oppression, the subordinate status of women, and even the possibility of change. The origin of the term can be traced to a *Ms* article published in 1972 called 'Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth'. In this article,

'click' was defined as: "A moment of truth. The shock of recognition. Instant sisterhood" (as quoted in Hercus, 2005, p. ix). During this period, women were becoming sensitised by media coverage of the Women's Liberation Movement and were beginning to notice issues in areas of their lives such as their relationships to their husbands or incidents in the workplace or in the church. Other women experienced the 'click' as a result of reading feminist literature such as Germaine Greer's (1970) *The Female Eunuch* (Hercus, 2005). Then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminists shifted their attention to the phenomenon of "I'm not a feminist but...". This refers to the phenomenon of young women who do not claim a feminist identity, but who believe in ideals such as gender equality (Pilcher, 1993). As discussed in the previous chapter, the media from the late 1980s through to the present day, have been proclaiming feminism's 'death' and claiming that young women are no longer interested in feminism and see it as irrelevant to their lives. Aronson (2003) argues that such media pronouncements are based on the widespread assumption that young women are not appreciative of gains made by feminism and do not support the movement at all. Another assumption underpinning these news articles is that young women are no longer interested in feminism, because women's fight for equality has been 'won' (Faludi, 1993). Such claims, Aronson (2003) contends, have rarely been explored. This is a point I am interested in exploring further. Both Aronson and Faludi here are of course discussing the context in the US. There have also been similar concerns raised regarding how much we know about young women's (dis)identification with feminism in the UK. For example, Pilcher (1999; 1998) asserts that anyone conducting a review regarding the status and influence of feminism in contemporary Britain needs to consider how women themselves respond to feminism. She observes how at the turn of the millennium, there was a surprising lack of evidence on how women understand and interpret feminism.

Historian Estelle Freedman (as cited in Walters, 2005) argues that from the point of origin, the term 'feminism' has been associated with negative connotations, and also notes that few politically engaged women have styled themselves as feminists. Walters (2005) further posits how in England, right up until the 1960s, the term 'feminism' was a pejorative term, with very few women's rights activists adopting the label. She highlights how in the 1960s and 1970s, women's rights activists called their movement Women's Liberation, which was often shortened (sometimes affectionately, and sometimes derogatively) to 'women's lib'. At the

same time, the term 'feminism' was beginning to be used again. Writers such as Walters (2005) consider it 'troubling' the way that the term 'feminism' seems to arouse caution in young women and find it surprising how many young women appear to repudiate feminism as a concept. Walters recounts how in the early 2000s when she asked several women who were in their early twenties (some of whom were university-educated, and others who were working) whether they identified with feminism, the majority responded in the negative:

The very term itself, one woman claimed, sounds stuffy and out of date. Feminism, she felt, has become, on the one hand, a playground for extremists – she termed them 'fundamentalists' – who had nothing useful to say to women like herself. On the other hand, she argued, feminism has become 'institutionalized', and she compared it to communism: it demands commitment, not simply to ideas, but to a generalized ideology. Moreover, she added, it is nowadays just another academic subject. You can get a degree in 'gender studies' and that, she felt, is the real kiss of death: proof, if any were needed, that feminism is no longer urgently relevant. (Walters, 2005, p. 5).

Walters (2005) goes on to speculate that such young women may change their mind in ten years or so when they must balance responsibilities such as housework, childrearing and employment. Bryson (1999) suggests that it is feminism's very successes which have undermined its appeal to young women, with women today in countries such as the UK seeing various rights and freedoms as self-evident entitlements rather than as feminist demands. Bryson asserts that to young women in the UK feminism can at best seem out-dated, and at worst as an anti-male obstacle to 'genuine' gender equality, or even a threat to relationships between men and women. As Bryson (1999) points out, it is not difficult to find reasons for such optimism in regards to women's position in contemporary society, due to the range of legal rights, opportunities and protections women in many parts of the world have gained since the late 1960s.

Harris (2004b) sketches out how in the West (Australia, UK, US, and Germany) during the early 1990s, a moral panic began to develop over young people. At the time, young people were considered to be inarticulate, directionless, lacking in motivation, apathetic and nihilistic. Young people's apparent introspection and lack of interest in engaging with politics was believed to reflect a problematic internalisation of individualist values such as focusing on the self. According to Harris, terms such as the 'me generation' began to circulate, and young people were described not so much as 'lost' and without values, but as having absorbed

capitalist messages of greed and the notion of personal development as central (and at the expense of commitment to the community). Harris recounts how selfishness, naïvety, and a lack of historical memory were all attributed to youth who were seen by older generations as having abandoned social causes in favour of personal advancement. Such criticism has been applied to young women in particular, due to their apparent lack of engagement with feminism, and according to Harris, this has been taken to indicate the extent to which young people have lost touch with social critique, as well as collectivist politics.

According to Harris (2004b), due to their alleged lack of interest in and engagement with formal politics, young women have been a longstanding problem for political science, as well as for those with progressive agendas looking towards women to articulate a commitment to social change. Harris explains how some feminists assumed that young women were silent on key feminist issues either because they believed they had everything they needed (e.g. Summers, 1994, speaking from a UK perspective) or because they were too 'troubled' and 'at risk' to find a feminist voice (e.g. Pipher, 1994, speaking from a US perspective). Those young women who did articulate feminist principles were judged (e.g. by Garner, 1995; and Greer, 1999) as not expressing them in 'appropriate ways' due to being either too absorbed in victimhood or misunderstanding feminism as being about 'having a laugh' and the simple reversal of sexual objectification (i.e. objectifying men). As already discussed in chapter 2, some feminists (e.g. McRobbie, 2009) drew upon a pessimistic narrative, with young women becoming the object of a range of fears about the future of social change and political movements such as feminism at the turn of the millennium. Harris (2004b) also recounts how criticisms were made by feminists in regards to young women's individualistic approaches to gender issues, with the charge made that young women are naïve about gender equality and confuse consumer power with political gains. For example, Taft (2004) explains how in the late 1990s the discourse of 'girl power' was deployed by mainstream media in both the UK and US to construct a version of girlhood which excludes girls' social and political selves. She argues that this discourse through its emphasis on consumerism, meritocracy, and the autonomous individual, limits young women's agency to merely the ability to purchase the 'right' products.

The discourse of 'girl power' is drawn upon by advertisers to market products and brands through language which 'celebrates' femininity and individualism. Blackmore (2001) argues that through this discourse, both consumer capitalism and the media have cultivated in many young women the sense that they can be successful, independent, and achieve anything they desire unhindered. Gill (as cited in Harris, 2004b, p. 22), suggests that being smart, savvy, and sexually attractive, as well as declaring this through consumption, are the new markers of young female success. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2004) suggest that a combination of social and economic changes, along with young women's growing sense of agency, has led young women to 'doing it for themselves' (p. 194). Young women in the West are growing up in a context in which many feminist goals have been achieved, but at the same time gender inequity still exists in the socio-economic order. This does raise interesting questions over how young women negotiate these contradictions and the extent to which young women engage with feminism, identify with it, or even consider it as a frame of reference in their day-to-day lives. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2004) describe how young women are often assumed to prefer an optimistic and individualistic interpretation of their worlds, and in turn, interpret feminism as being an ideology about self-belief and overcoming difficulties through personal effort. Aapola, Gonick and Harris consider that it has become common for critics of young women to automatically assume their repudiation of feminism and view young women as complacent in relation to feminist gains. I am interested in exploring this myself and investigating how young women construct their subjectivities and the discourses they draw upon when talking about feminism.

#### *3.4.2 Researching women's relationship with feminism*

Going beyond the 'death of feminism' debate in the media, there have been empirical studies which have focused on young women and their relationship with feminism. There have been various studies conducted using quantitative approaches underpinned by a (post-)positivist paradigm. Such studies tend to concentrate more on what can be (arguably) measured rather than looking for deeper meaning. One approach is measuring people's attitudes to feminism, women and/or politics (e.g. Byrne, 2011; Fitzpatrick Bettencourt, 2011), while also measuring other variables such as political affiliation and religiosity (e.g.

Sotelo, 1997) and determining which of these could be a predictor for a positive attitude towards feminism. Another approach is to have participants look at vignettes and indicate whether they think gender discrimination took place in a given scenario and/or rate feminist and non-feminist women in terms of how likeable they are or how much of a complainer they are, among other factors (e.g. Roy, Weibust & Miller, 2009; Anastosopoulos & Desmarais, 2015). Other studies ask participants (US students) to indicate which personality traits they think feminists possess (such as 'feminine', 'masculine', 'liberal', 'assertive') or what they think a feminist's sexual orientation is likely to be (e.g. Twenge & Zucker, 1999). Another angle quantitative studies tend to take is to analyse and compare whether a particular factor (such as holding certain values or being politically active) can indicate the likelihood of particular behaviours (e.g. Zucker & Cole, 1998; Lewis, 1999; Stake, 2007). Other studies simply focus on the levels of feminist consciousness among men and women and scoring attitudes towards various women's issues (e.g. Henderson-King & Zhermer, 2003) or comparing levels of feminist consciousness with the number of negative experiences an individual has encountered in their day-to-day life (e.g. Buschmann & Lenart, 1996). However, I feel that these quantitative studies are oversimplistic in the way that they approach women's relationship with feminism, as well as treating it as something that can be objectively measured. It should also be noted that the majority of these involved samples of US undergraduate students (male and female) or women alumni. The exceptions here are: a sample of US women voters (Lewis, 1999), a sample of Canadian undergraduates (Anastosopoulos & Desmarais, 2015), and a sample of Spanish secondary school pupils (Sotelo, 1997). Regardless, Anglo-European and Anglo-American students (particularly first year psychology students) tend to be the predominate group represented in quantitative studies on feminist (dis)identification. For the rest of this section, I will provide a review of qualitative approaches to investigating young women's relationship with feminism.

Similarly, to some examples of quantitative studies, some feminist researchers have conducted qualitative research focused on feminist identity. For example, in her own research in Australia on 'becoming and being feminist', Hercus developed the fractal model which is based upon and integrates both feminist and social movements' theory and research. A key concept of the fractal model of movement involvement is that of collective identity (defined as the sense of unity,

the 'we' feeling and sense of belonging associated with participating in collective action) as it provides a link between structural conditions and collective action. The fractal model employs a biographical perspective and views that the construction of feminists occurs simultaneously as an individual and collective process (Hercus, 2005).

In her development of a fractal model of becoming and being feminist, Hercus (2005) identified four intertwined components of a feminist subjectivity: knowing (consciousness), feeling (emotions), belonging (identity) and doing (action), each of which exists at both a personal and collective level. According to Hercus, these components are constructed collectively as discourses and practices by movements, institutions and groups within a field or environment of action. These discourses then become available to individuals as resources for constructing their subjectivity and for acting in the world. In the fractal model, the process of becoming and being feminist first involves thinking about (or knowing) the world in a certain way (Hercus, 2005). This aspect of feminist subjectivity is often referred to as feminist consciousness and includes an awareness of and rejection of gender inequality as being unjust and worth fighting against. This process involves a woman coming to accept a set of beliefs which define women's problems in structural terms (at least to some extent) and as a gendered form of social justice. Hercus argues this does not imply a lack of recognition of other axes of injustice (such as poverty) but an awareness of gender-based injustice is required. The second component in the fractal model proposes that feminist subjectivity involves experiencing particular feelings about the world which can be identified as feminist. Hercus (2005) states how anger tends to be the emotion discussed and analysed in relation to feminist subjectivity, but notes that in recent years there has been more attention paid to positive emotions such as empathy and affection for other women. The third component involves an individual identifying their self as belonging to the group or category of feminism. This collective identification has been referred to by social movement scholars as the 'we' feeling and by feminists as the 'sisterhood'. Hercus highlights how in her fractal model, this belonging is complex and not synonymous with possessing feminist consciousness or emotions and suggests this is exemplified by the "I'm not a feminist but" phenomenon where women incorporate aspects of feminist consciousness into their understanding of the world, but do not define themselves as feminists. Finally, the fourth component involves doing "feminist



types of things” (p. 11). Hercus argues that this ‘doing’ is broader than the usual activities associated with activism (such as signing petitions, and organising and/or attending protests); it can include actions taken in day-to-day life such as: buying women’s books, music and artwork; producing newsletters; or volunteering with organisations such as rape crisis centres. It can also encompass the way women choose to raise their children and the way they conduct themselves at work.

Underpinning reasons for women (dis)identifying with feminism have been explored by feminists such as Griffin (1989), Baumgardner and Richards (2000) and Redfern and Aune (2010). In her earlier work, Griffin (1989) considered several possible reasons for (dis)identification such as the UK media’s predominantly negative representation of feminism, the threat of being labelled a lesbian and male intimidation. Male intimidation, Griffin states, can involve using the label feminism or ‘women’s libber’ as an insult or accusation. Similarly, in the US, Baumgardner and Richards (2000) consider the possibility of young women not wanting to be identified solely as feminists or associated with feminist stereotypes (stereotypes such as feminists are lesbians, man-haters and unfeminine). Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2004) suggest that young women’s reluctance to adopt the feminist label is not simply because of a backlash attributing negative stereotypes to the concept, or because they think it is unfashionable or outdated. Instead, they suggest it is because feminism is still seen as non-inclusive. For example, Green (1995) argues that while the feminist movement has come far in acknowledging the diversity of women in respect to sexual orientation, class, and ethnicity, it still has far to go in relation to women with disabilities who she states are grossly concentrated in the margins. Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2004) note that the image of feminism as being for white, middle-class, middle-aged, non-disabled heterosexuals has not shifted much and suggest that some young women may be using alternative terms such as Alice Walker’s ‘womanist’ instead. Some commentators such as Morgan (1999) have criticised the focus on the importance of the feminist label, arguing that it serves as a way to homogenise the diversity of women’s voices in the movement.

I would agree with Aapola, Gonick and Harris’s (2004) sentiment that many assumptions have been made about young women’s relationship with feminism. Griffin (2001) elucidates how contemporary discussions in the UK position ‘young

women' and 'feminism' as separate identities which are distinct from each other. This, she argues, overlooks the diversity of young women and of feminists. As a result, adult women and feminism are placed in an 'us and them' binary in relation to young women. As she points out, feminism has always been a site for debate and dispute in particular over the relevance of the various branches of feminism for women in different groups such as working class women and lesbian and bisexual women. Certainly research by feminists appears to show that such binaries are too simplistic to account for young women's relationship with the term. For instance, Jowett (2001) found that when the British young women who took part in her focus groups talked about feminism, it was not viewed as a fixed state that one is either 'in' or 'not in'. Instead, Jowett suggests it is a set of complex ideas and practices containing contradictions and ambivalences, which are shaped through dynamic relationships. Indeed, research such as Pilcher's (1998) interviews with women based in the UK, adds some complexity to the picture. Pilcher found that young women (aged 17-29) were more likely to be positive towards feminism, more knowledgeable about the movement, and more likely to claim the feminist label than older women (aged over 60). However, Pilcher also found that at the same time the young women viewed feminism with a level of ambiguity due to an awareness of stereotypes of feminists as 'obsessive', 'unfeminine' and 'extreme'. While the young women agreed with principles of equality in regards to work, pay, education, and domestic chores, many interviewed did not agree with feminist perspectives in regards to the objectification of women's bodies (e.g. such as 'Page 3' in *The Sun* newspaper). Additionally, Pilcher identified the young women's talk as being dominated by individualist discourse whereby the rights of individuals were emphasised.

Walters (2005) speculates that as feminism has become a 'legitimate' subject (part of the academy) which has been 'spoonfed' to younger generations of girls, as opposed to something fresh and exciting they discovered themselves, it has become (at least in their eyes) respectable and dull. Walters even suggests that perhaps this is a natural and healthy reaction on the part of the girls and young women having a "sneaking yearning to be politically 'incorrect'" (p. 140). Based on this point, Walters proposes that in order for feminism to regain the 'air of excitement' it once had in the 1960s and 1970s and move forward, it may be necessary for young women to reinvent feminism in terms of their own

experience. On the other hand, O'Brien's (1999) research with young Australian women suggests that even though young women do not adopt the title of 'feminist' and find it problematic, this does not necessarily mean they are not engaged in feminist practice. O'Brien argues that feminism should not only be determined as legitimate when it takes on a recognised form of activism, and believes that feminism can have an important role in the 'micropolitics' of young women's everyday lives. For example, O'Brien's participants did not claim the feminist label, but they were engaged in developing support, solidarity and a cultural space for young women, while also constructing a critique of gender inequality. Further, O'Brien reports how the young women she interviewed avoided the feminist label as they believed that when a woman espouses feminist attitudes she becomes 'The Feminist' and they wanted to avoid being perceived in a negative and one-dimensional manner. Some feminists such as Baumgardner and Richards (2000) argue that too much of a focus on the importance of the feminist label can prevent us from seeing the feminist work young women are actually engaged in "Some of this confusion is due to the fact that most young women don't get together to talk about 'Feminism' with a capital 'F'" (p. 48).

Another issue identified in feminist research relates to that of 'feminist gatekeepers'. Returning to the context of binaries which Griffin (2001) discussed, the distinction between 'us' (adult feminists) and 'them' (young women) could be a potential barrier, due to older feminists either failing to acknowledge and recognise young women's activities as feminist, or criticising them as not feminist enough. Redfern and Aune (2010) suggest that some young women are less likely to label themselves feminists if they subscribe to a narrow definition of feminism (e.g. feminists go on marches). Aapola, Gonick and Harris (2004) suggest this has been one of the most enduring criticisms made by older feminists of young women, in that being feminist means being active in a pre-defined political movement, coupled with the belief that young women want the benefits and kudos of feminism without putting in the collective work. Aapola, Gonick and Harris describe such criticism as treating feminism as an object that is owned by the previous generation and can only passed on to the 'appropriate heirs'.

Some feminists in their research have challenged the claims that young women refuse to identify with the feminist label for reasons such as feminism's negative public image. For example, Jowett (2004) suggests that the process of (dis)investment in feminist ideas and identities is far more complex and relates to young women's specific relationship to a particular period in British history. Jowett argues that the British cultural imagery the young women in her study grew up with has been filled with powerful discourses of progress, achievement and optimism. These were produced through the futuristic rhetoric of the then New Labour government and the millennial moment of reflective celebration. Jowett proposes that these discourses impacted on young women's assessments of feminism as an (ir)relevant politics for the twenty-first century. According to Jowett, this persuasive notion of accomplished female emancipation and future female power undermined the critical engagement of young women with feminism as a body of thought and instead nurtured the creation of new understandings of persistent feminists as 'passé' and preposterous, which further added to their disinvestment in the movement. In sum, Jowett's argument is that it is not simply a case of young women recognising value in feminist ideas, while rejecting a feminist identity due to media-inspired stereotypes. Instead it is the case that the idea of feminism as relevant is culturally proscribed. It is Jowett's contention that young women are not ideological dupes, but are engaged in a process of negotiation as they venture to understand potent discourses which simultaneously speak to and contradict their own experiences, and thereby impact on their readings of the world and feminism's place within it.

There have been other studies like Jowett's (2004) which appear to indicate the influence of individualist rhetoric on young women's (dis)identification with feminism. In her research with young British women, Budgeon (2001) found that while young women did not claim a feminist identity, they did draw upon feminist ideals as resources in their identity formation. However, while these young women did perceive gender inequities in social relations and named them as such, the solutions they suggested tended to be individualised rather than collective in nature. Similarly, Sharpe (2001) found evidence in her own research to suggest that solidarity and cohesion amongst young women in the UK has been undermined by British society's emphasis on individualism and enterprise. Though Sharpe does note that the aims and principles espoused by the young

women in her study were feminist in nature, even if they were not explicitly articulated as being feminist.

More recently, Scharff (2010) carried out in-depth interviews with young British and German women to explore how they talk about feminism. Scharff identified the co-existence of two key interpretative repertoires in the data. The first was a repertoire which depicted feminism as a valuable social movement which has helped bring gender equality, and therefore is no longer needed. The second was a competing repertoire which represented feminism as an extreme stance that goes too far. In many of the interviewees' accounts, feminism was implicitly invoked, but frequently remained unvoiced, indicating it was taken for granted. Scharff suggests that this co-existence of two seemingly contradictory interpretative repertoires could be explained by the concept of a postfeminist sensibility (characterised by a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment) and McRobbie's (2009) notion of 'double entanglement' whereby feminism has to be taken into account in order to then be discredited, rejected and dismissed as redundant or extreme. Scharff also identified in the interviews the prevalence of neoliberal and individualist discourse which served to keep any discussion of personal experiences a safe distance away from feminist political claims. A further distancing was accomplished through the recurring trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' whereby feminism and its claims were pushed away from the self to either the public realm or to other communities and other parts of the world. A second central figure which tended to characterise the women's talk was the 'man-hating, unfeminine, lesbian feminist'. Scharff conceptualised the trope of the feminist as a 'constitutive outside' of the heteronormative order which 'haunts' participants' accounts. A final way of participants distancing themselves from feminism which Scharff identified was through a performative citation of heterosexual femininity, whereby feminists were repudiated and connoted as homosexual and unfeminine.

### **3.5 Summary of the chapter and aims of the research**

In chapter 2, I provided the background context of debates surrounding the question of 'is feminism dead', as well as the constructions in play regarding young women (e.g. young women are 'postfeminists'). In this chapter, the focus

was shifted to reviewing academic literature which informs this research. This began with an overview of the field of girls' studies covering the shift from 'boy-centric' youth studies, to a focus on studying girls and young women. I then turned my attention towards studying women in relation to media and highlighting the value of media studies. In particular, I focused on discussing the media of interest to this research (magazines, blogs and initially zines) and explaining my decisions behind the media I chose to study. This was followed by an overview of research centred around young women and their relationship with feminism, in particular in terms of how young women were constructed. For example, discourses of young women tend to be constructed with an implicit assumption that 1) they repudiate feminism, 2) they are apolitical, and 3) they interpret the world through an individualistic lens (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2004). There have been interview studies conducted involving young women (e.g. Scharff, 2010; Budgeon, 2001; Sharpe, 2001; Jowett, 2001). Some of these do appear to indicate young women are drawing upon discourses of individualism and that this has worked to keep young women from embracing a feminist subjectivity. This PhD research seeks to build on previous research by exploring how young women together co-construct discourses centred around gender and feminism, as well as whether they reproduce discourses found in women's magazines and feminist blogs and if so, how they negotiate these.

This current PhD research encompassed three main studies. The first study involves a media text study which examines discourses on gender and feminism in women's monthly magazines. The second study also involves a media text study examining discourses on gender and feminism, but will focus on feminist (we)blogs as the chosen medium under study. A limitation of studying media texts is that this does not tell us what women 'do' with such discourses and how they interpret them which is of interest to this research. Study 3 aims to build on the previous two studies by investigating how young women construct their subjectivities and negotiate (any) contradictory subject positions which are made available in cultural texts such as magazines. While previous research on zines and blogs tended to focus on studying feminist activists and their position in relation to zines (e.g. Kempson, 2014), this research concentrates on young women in general (who may or may not identify with a feminist subjectivity) and whether they reproduce any of the discourses which can be found in feminist blogs (and also discourses from magazines). Study 3 involves mini-focus groups

conducted with young women aged 18-30 years. All of the collected data for each of these studies was analysed using a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008).

The PhD research has two main objectives. The first objective of this research is to examine discourses in the medium of printed women's monthly magazines and online feminist blogs, paying attention to how gender and feminism are constructed. This objective is also concerned with what subject positions are made available by these discourses. This objective was addressed by Study 1 which involved a media-text study of women's monthly magazines and Study 2 which involved a media-text study of online feminist blogs.

The second objective of the research is concerned with exploring how young women interpret and construct gender and feminism and the difficulties/tensions (if any) they encounter in negotiating these. This objective is also concerned with how young women position themselves in relation to feminism. This objective was addressed by Study 3 which involved a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of data generated from seven mini-focus group discussions with young women aged 18-30.

The research questions for Study 1 are:

- 1a) How are gender and feminism discursively constructed in women's monthly magazines?
- 1b) What subject positions are being made available by these discourses?

The research questions for Study 2 are:

- 2a) How are gender and feminism discursively constructed in online feminist blogs?
- 2b) What subject positions are being made available by these discourses?

The research questions for Study 3 are:

- 3a) How do young women co-construct feminism?
- 3b) How do young women position themselves in relation to feminism?
- 3c) What are the difficulties and contradictions young women encounter in claiming a feminist subjectivity within the context of mini focus groups?

## **CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

#### *4.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

In this chapter, I provide the reader with a discussion of the epistemological positioning underpinning and methodological framework surrounding the research studies conducted. This starts with a discussion around the nature of qualitative research explaining what this is, whilst acknowledging that qualitative research is not homogenous but rather is a diverse field. This also ties into a discussion of critical social psychology. In the second part of this chapter, the ontological and epistemological positioning of my research (relativist and social constructionist respectively) is discussed. This involves explaining both of these terms, as well as discussing key ideas and debates. The final part of this chapter is an overview of feminist-influenced poststructuralist discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008) which is the analytical approach used in all three studies of this thesis. This includes discussion of Foucault's ideas, as well as those of Nikolas Rose. In particular, I discuss and explain in detail the three dimensions my analysis of the data was sensitive to: genealogy, power, and subject positions.

### **4.2 Critical social psychology**

#### *4.2.1 What is critical social psychology?*

As discussed in chapter 3, since the early-to-mid-twentieth century, the discipline of psychology has been dominated by a (post-)positivist, experimental paradigm and the 'scientific method'. Branches of psychology such as behaviourism and cognitive psychology situate themselves in opposition to the more subjective, interpretative qualitative techniques which were used in early psychology and criticisms accusing qualitative approaches of being 'unscientific' are still apparent in the early twenty-first century (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative approaches were part of psychology at its inception, but due to the increasing dominance of positivism, did not regain much ground again in the field of psychology until the



1980s (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Outside of the field of psychology, work by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s establishing the grounded theory approach, offered sociology a methodologically sophisticated qualitative approach which drew broadly on language. In the early 1970s, Harré and Secord proposed ethogenics as a new approach for psychology. Madill (2015) suggests that this work pre-empted the 'turn to language' in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and also provided an increasingly secure foothold within psychology for qualitative methods. Indeed, Stainton Rogers (2011) observes how in the 1970s, there were a number of social psychologists (including Harré) calling to 'put the social back into social psychology' (p. 22). From the mid-1980s onwards, psychologists began to draw upon ideas from other social sciences and humanities disciplines such as sociology and began to explore the use of social constructionist approaches for studying gender and sexuality (Madill, 2015). By the end of the 1980s, Parker (1989) called this shift 'the crisis in modern social psychology' and argued that it needed to be resolved.

Researchers who employ a qualitative paradigm are (whether it be implicitly or even explicitly) rejecting the values, assumptions, and practices of quantitative experimental psychology. The roots of this rejection can often be found not only in the theoretical convictions of the researcher, but also in their political commitment to social change agendas (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Madill (2015) notes how the sensitivity to ideology within many qualitative approaches allows qualitative researchers to study the politics and processes of discrimination and exclusion. According to Fox, Prilleltensky, and Austin (2009), most critical social psychologists have a strong commitment to social justice and would agree that they have a duty to 'make the world a better place'. However, as Stainton Rogers (2011) notes, many critical social psychologists are also critical of institutionalised social psychology and how it defines 'better'. Some critical psychologists such as Parker (1989) argue the discipline needs to go further and be used as a form of political activism directed towards challenging oppression "It should also, though, be concerned with how people can collectively *change* the order of things for themselves" (p. 1). Topics studied by critical social psychologists tend to be those concerned in one fashion or another with the abuse of power. Some can include an overt focus on issues such as exploitation, abuse, and domination, while others may be less overtly 'political'. Though Stainton Rogers (2011) asserts that the analysis applied by critical social psychologists *always* has a 'political'

undercurrent and that critical social psychologists are motivated by particular ideological or political standpoints (such as Marxism, feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism). Here, by ideology, Stainton Rogers is referring to a general sense of ideas, morals, and ethics about what 'ought' to be. Critical social psychology focuses on inequality and social justice rather than on universal benefits for all. This means critical social psychologists tend to concentrate on social change to bring about a fairer society and aim to challenge oppression, prejudice, and exploitation. Indeed, my own research as a critical social psychologist is informed by my feminist politics and interest in gender relations and inequality. It is also interested in examining how power is exerted not in a traditional top-down institutionalised form (as political scientists would focus on), but as working through subjectivity. Foucault (2008) sees power as productive not repressive and is tied up with the 'care of the self'. I am interested in seeing how this plays out in relation to gender, which is why this study adopts a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis as its analytical approach. This also sits well with critical social psychology. Traditional social psychology would not afford any approach towards analysing power relations between different groups of people. A further issue with traditional social psychology is its conception of the 'knower' as an isolated individual. As Tanesini (1999) argues, this places undue emphasis on autonomy as being an important precondition for knowledge, while downplaying the importance of social context and fails to acknowledge the value of factors such as gender for the theory of knowledge.

Working in the discipline of critical social psychology, requires more than simply using qualitative methods. Indeed, Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that in order to become a good qualitative researcher, a 'qualitative sensibility' is essential. This refers to an orientation towards research which includes being interested in process and meaning (rather than cause and effect) and having a critical and questioning approach to knowledge. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), researchers who have a qualitative sensibility do not take the object under study at face value and accept things as they are, rather, they ask questions about *why* an object under study may be that way, how it could be different, and whose interests are served by things being the way they are. Qualitative researchers need to develop a 'double-consciousness' or an analytic 'eye' or 'ear' so they can not only listen intently to the content of what is being said by participants (such as in an interview or focus group), but also critically reflect on what is being said.

Qualitative researchers also need to be able to step outside of their cultural membership so they can reflect on and question the shared values and assumptions of society. As discussed in chapter 1 (see. 1.3.1), in alignment with my feminist politics and commitment to adopting a poststructuralist feminist approach, I will be drawing upon Staunae's (2003) interlocking and majority-inclusive approach when reflecting on the findings of this research project in chapter 9. Tied in with this is reflexivity which involves critical reflection on the research process and the researcher's own role in this, as well as consideration of the researcher's various insider and outsider positions. I will discuss the importance of reflexivity and what it involves in chapter 9 where I will engage in critical reflection on my own research. There I will draw upon Wilkinson's (1988) framework for reflexive discussion which is based around three dimensions: a) personal reflexivity (reflecting on the researcher's own identity, interests, and values); b) functional reflexivity (reflecting on methodological decisions and the researcher's relationships with the participants); and c) disciplinary reflexivity (concerned with the extent to which a researcher's interpretations are congruent with their research agenda and how the findings fit into the broader field).

The field of qualitative research can be divided into two broad camps which Braun and Clarke (2013) delineate as 'experiential' and 'critical'. Experiential research validates the views, perspectives, experiences, practices and/or meanings expressed by participants within the data. In experiential research the participant's interpretations are accepted, prioritised and focused on by the researcher, rather than the data being used as a basis for analysing something else. Researchers in this camp are driven by their desire to 'get inside' people's heads, to access people's own views and meanings and to prioritise these in the research analysis and write-up. In experiential research, the research process primarily involves collecting information (such as people's life stories) and then organising around this an interpretative framework. From here, experiential researchers aim to make sense of how the world is experienced, seen, and understood from the participant's perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Critical research, on the other hand, adopts an interrogative stance towards the views, experiences, and meanings expressed in the data, and uses these to explore a particular phenomenon. In critical research, language is not seen as a means to get 'inside' a person's head, but instead the focus is on language as it

is used 'out there' in the external world, and also on how language gives shape to particular social realities, as well as the subsequent impact of these social realities (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), critical research is interested in comprehending the factors influencing, and the effects of, particular representations and/or meanings expressed within the data. This is what my own research is interested in, so my research is located at the critical end of the qualitative spectrum. At its core, critical qualitative research does not take data at face value, and so the researchers' interpretations become more important than the participants' in the analysis and write-up of research findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

An important point to note about critical qualitative research, is that while it is at heart about language as a mode of communication, such research does not just focus on semantic content. Rather, the focus is shifted towards understanding language as the main mode through which "the reality of our world is *created*" (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 25). This means language is used to explore the ways different versions of reality are produced within a dataset. Researchers taking a critical approach adopt a constitutive (or productive) view of language, and the bedrock of this view is that language *creates* rather than reflects reality (Weedon, 1997). In contrast with experiential research, critical research does not see talk as a window into how participants 'really feel' about a particular topic. Instead, talk is viewed as depicting a 'reality' about the topic that participants are creating or constructing through the way they talk about it. This, in turn, reflects the broader ways of understanding made available within the participants' sociocultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Research on representation and construction tends to be focused on factors which shape or create meaning, as well as the effects and implications of certain patterns of meaning. Braun and Clarke (2013) maintain that because language is seen to be one of the main means by which both representation and construction occurs, critical qualitative research is ideal for researchers who are interested in these. One of the main assumptions of critical research into representation and construction is that there are numerous ways an object could be represented, and that in turn, different representations have different implications for individuals and society. Some research based in this tradition involves the

practice of deconstruction (e.g. Parker, 1988) in which texts are 'taken apart' and interrogated for both dominant and hidden assumptions.

#### **4.3 Relativism and social constructionism**

All qualitative methodologies have their own particular theoretical framework which informs the research process from formulating the research question through to data collection and analysis. Methodology relies upon ontology (theories about the nature of reality) and epistemology (theories about the nature of knowledge), both of which demarcate what can and cannot count as meaningful knowledge, as well as informing methodology and methods (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). A researcher first needs to identify their goal and then justify the choices they make in relation to the methods they use. This requires clarity of the research objectives, as well as a sense of what it is possible to find out, which in turn requires the researcher to adopt an epistemological position (Willig, 2013). Methodology describes a general approach to examining research topics, while methods refers to specific research techniques (Silverman, 1993). According to Willig (2013), it is important to distinguish between methodology and methods as the former is more directly informed by the researcher's epistemological position than the latter. In the case of methods, this is not proscribed by the researcher's methodological position, though Willig (2013) stresses it is important to note that not all research methods are compatible with all methodologies. For example, social constructionism is not compatible with methods designed to measure variables in a given population. This is because social constructionism problematises the concept of psychological variables and is more concerned with how constructs such as variables are made 'real'. It is also important to acknowledge that ontology and epistemology are not entirely independent from one another and that together they lead into and constrain the particular methodology and methods which are appropriate for a research project. Different sorts of knowledge are generated via different theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Differing ontological positions specify the relationship between the world and human interpretations and practices. A researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality determine their ontological position. Realism is an ontological position

which assumes a knowable world which can be understood through research, that the 'truth' (of which there is only one) is 'out there' and can be accessed via application of the appropriate research methods. Realists believe reality exists entirely separate from human practices and understandings. Realism is the ontology which generally underpins and informs quantitative research, but it rarely informs qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Relativism on the other hand, is an ontological position which assumes there are multiple constructed realities and that we can never go beyond these to find any kind of underlying 'truth' or 'reality' that underpins them. Relativists believe reality cannot be separated from human practices and therefore knowledge in turn inevitably reflects a person's perspective. It is this ontological position which informs the research in this thesis.

A relativist ontological position assumes that what is 'real' and 'true' differs across time and space, as opposed to being universal. This means that what can be known reflects where and how particular knowledge is generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Bruner (1990, as cited in Wetherell & Still, 1998) asserts that 'realities' are the product of prolonged and intricate processes of construction and negotiation through human interaction and that these are deeply embedded within a culture. This means that observations will always be contextual and therefore dependent upon one perspective or another. From this perspective, we only come to know objects and events through our human-made interpretations. Human constructions are constitutive of the nature of the world. Wetherell and Still (1998) argue that constructions and ideas matter, as they become a material force in relation to changing ideas, "the appearance of truth and reality emerge out of living activity, they are not pre-requisites for it" (p.108). How events and objects are understood and what is seen as causing or creating them is constituted through a person's systems of social constructions. In particular, this constitutive process is central to the kind of 'realities' which critical social psychologists study. According to Wetherell and Still (1998), relativism "denies that there is **any** single universal standard for judging the truth of different descriptions" (p. 99). Wetherell and Still elucidate how the possibility of multiple constructed realities implies that there can be no absolute underlying standards which can be judged against, and that if this is the case then 'truth' will always be relative. Though they also suggest that some realities will be preferable to others,

proposing that most people will prefer to live in a world free from pain and suffering for instance.

Epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and the question of 'what' it is possible to know and 'how' we can know it (Willig, 2013). Differing epistemological positions are concerned with what counts as 'legitimate knowledge', and which knowledge is valid and trustworthy, which knowledge can be considered meaningful. Conversely, an epistemological position can also determine what is not seen as valid knowledge. In turn, a particular epistemology prescribes *how* meaningful and valid knowledge can be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), a basic distinction between epistemological positions relates to whether a researcher believes that reality (whether external or personal) is 'discovered' through the process of research (and exists independently of the researcher's practice), or rather that reality is 'created' through the research process itself (with the researcher being involved in producing that reality). As Braun and Clarke (2013) point out, in the West, it is a scientific epistemology (specifically positivism) which is the dominant epistemological position. This privileges scientific knowledge over other (unscientific) forms of knowledge, which are deemed to be untrustworthy and biased. Other epistemologies (such as social constructionism) question the notion that knowledge is an objective reflection of reality. Instead, social constructionism is underpinned by the assumption that what is known of the world, objects, and of ourselves is produced (or constructed) via various discourses and systems of meaning which we are all located within. From this perspective, 'truth' can change, and therefore there can be no *one* 'truth', rather there are multiple knowledges, and knowledge of how things are is a product of how people come to understand the world (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In sum, social constructionism views 'reality' as socially constructed, as multiple, and as fluctuating or changing.

Social constructionists look at the complex web of stories, myths, judgements, and the meanings and practices which make up a culture (Wetherell & Still, 1998). Wetherell and Maybin (1996, as cited in Wetherell & Still, 1998) argue that these meanings and practices constitute a person's reality. Social

constructionists also view knowledges as 'social artefacts', which are therefore seen as social, cultural, political, moral, and ideological (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to Wetherell and Still (1998), the task of critical social psychologists is to study a world made up of human interpretative practices, as well as objects, relationships, cultures and societies. Social constructionists draw attention to how the human experience is mediated linguistically, culturally, and historically (Willig, 2013). What this means is that what a person perceives and experiences does not directly reflect environmental conditions, but rather is a specific reading of those conditions. The same phenomenon, event, or object can be described in different ways, which in turn gives rise to different ways of perceiving and understanding these. In social constructionism, none of these different ways of describing an object are considered to be 'wrong'. Indeed, researchers adopting a social constructionist position are interested in the various ways reality can be and is constructed and which constructions are made available for people in society to draw upon. Researchers are not just interested in identifying and describing these constructions, but also in tracing the implications of these for human experience and practices (Willig, 2013). Indeed, this is the focus of my own research. I am not interested in the experiences, views, feelings, and thoughts of individual women. The use of language, or rather, more specifically, discourse, is the focus of my research. I am interested in going beyond simply identifying and describing the patterns identified in research data, and exploring the meanings conveyed by the discourses identified. For example, the way in which women and feminism are represented in media (magazines and blogs), the subject positions made available, and what the implications of these discourses are for women and society.

There are also implications for the critical social psychologist as Wetherell and Still (1998) point out. If a person's access to reality is likely to be incomplete, and reflects their personal and social relationships, then what does this mean for the critical social psychologist? Is the psychologist's view as incomplete, and dependent on personal history and location as it is for 'ordinary people'? Is it only 'ordinary people' "who have a problematic relationship with reality? Does the social psychologist have some kind of privileged access?" (p. 102). Edwards et al. (1995, as cited in Wetherell & Still, 1998) refer to this as the loss of 'authorial meanings' (the loss of a final authority, who can decide the truth outside argument). Edwards et al. argue that adopting a relativist position does not stop



you from making assertions, taking stands or arguing for or against certain values. This is a point I strongly agree with, which is why I believe it is important as a researcher to engage in reflexivity and critically (and honestly) reflect on your own position and values in relation to the research carried out. Experience is mediated by discourses, and is inescapable. Likewise, the texts and methods used by researchers do not exist outside the political landscape (Saukko, 2003, 2008). The image of the disembodied researcher who stands above and apart from their research sits well with neither a social constructionist, nor a feminist research approach. Not only are participants socially located, but so too are researchers I argue. Saukko (2003) proposes that just as we pay attention to politics embedded in the data we are analysing, we should also pay attention to the political, social, and historical agendas embedded in our own understanding and interpretations.

Edwards et al. (1995, as cited in Wetherell & Still, 1998) argue that if knowledge, reality and truth are human constructions, then there is even more pressure for an academic to think, argue and work out their point of view and learn how to defend it. Interestingly, Wetherell and Still (1998) describe how modern social constructionism is closely related to the development of Karl Mannheim's 'sociology of knowledge'. Mannheim argued that because knowledge developed as a result of a social process, then the *origin* of ideas and knowledge claims could be studied. From this perspective, a key question would be 'why this kind of knowledge claim at this period in history?', rather than "is this idea true or false?" While Mannheim hesitated over whether *all* scientific knowledge was subject to social determination, modern sociology of science is less hesitant about examining this notion. Wetherell and Still (1998) suggest that those adopting a social constructionist position would expect their own knowledge claims to be open to the same kind of process of questioning and debate as other knowledges. They acknowledge that their own claims to knowledge are constructed. As Wetherell and Still observe, it would be odd to produce knowledge within such a framework which does not explain its own emergence. Researchers can engage in reflexive practice here, whereby they can ask questions such as "how have our knowledge and arguments been constructed to persuade an audience?" (p. 110).

Some feminists are critical of feminist poststructuralism and social constructionist approaches, arguing that they depoliticise feminism. However, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) contend the notion that feminist poststructuralism is apolitical. Feminist poststructuralist researchers grapple with considerations around how to balance empirical research on embodied and material differences, inequalities, and power relations, with critical reflections on the production of knowledge. The centrality of women's experiences is fundamental to feminist poststructuralist work, as well as a commitment to studying (for instance) exploitative power relations.

Another criticism levelled at social construction is that the category of 'woman' is undermined as the subject/agent of feminist politics (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Butler (1992) contests the argument that politics requires a stable subject. Feminist poststructuralists do not dispense with the notion of subject altogether. They required the notion of subject from the start, querying how the subject is constructed, along with any political meaning and consequences of this. Butler contends that neither deconstructing the subject, nor taking the construction of the subject as a political problematic is the same as abandoning the subject altogether:

To deconstruct is not to negate or to dismiss, but to call into question and, perhaps most importantly, to open up a term, like the subject, to a reusage or redeployment that previously has not been authorized.

(Butler, 1992, p. 15).

Butler does not deny that there is some political necessity to speak as and for women, but this necessity needs to be reconciled with debate over the descriptive content of the term 'woman'. Every time a specificity (e.g. women as childbearers, or maternity as social relation) is articulated, there is resistance and factionalisation in response to the specificity. Butler makes an excellent point here that in the 1980s, the universal notion of feminism, the 'we' was rightly called into question by feminists of colour who argued this 'we' to be invariably white and middle-class. Butler believes that ultimately, any effort made to define 'woman' in universal terms will inevitably lead to factionalisation. Identity categories rather than being merely descriptive, are always normative and as a result also exclusionary. Butler emphasises that this does not mean the category 'woman' should not be used, nor that the 'death of category' be declared. Instead, the term 'woman' could become a site of openness and resignifiability.

Critically, Butler proposes that to deconstruct the subject is not to censure its usage, but to open it up to multiple significations and release it from the significations it had previously been restricted to (e.g. women as maternal).

Gill (1995) suggests that we need not be limited to a choice of either embracing or abandoning relativism. She believes that there is a way of articulating poststructuralist ideas to an emancipatory political project. Gill points out that relativists are right to point out that there is no connection between 'truth' and emancipation. The 'truth' has often been oppressive to women and relativists are right to criticise realists for collapsing moral conviction into ontological realism. Gill contends that it is justice feminists want, not 'truth', as there is no evidence to suggest that appeals to 'truth' have ever been an effective strategy in bringing about change. Gill calls for 'politically informed relativism' which bears similarities with Butler's (1992) 'contingent foundationalism' in which Butler proposes a permanent contestation over that which seeks to present itself as self-evident. I believe this is a worthy route for feminist poststructuralists to adopt. Like other relativists before me, I am critical of realist approaches to research which treat knowledge as existing outside of and independent to the researcher, their values, and beliefs. Gill (1995) proposes that relativists make social transformation an explicit concern of our work, and that we should also acknowledge the values which inform our research, and situate our interpretations within the political realm. Reflexivity is the tool which Gill describes as being an essential part of politically-informed relativism. Indeed, this is a tool I have already highlighted as being important in conducting critical-based work.

#### **4.4 Mini-focus groups**

Before moving on to a discussion of the analytical approach this thesis takes, I will briefly discuss the chosen data collection method for Study 3 and rationalise its usage.

Focus groups involve one or more group discussions within which participants focus collectively on a particular topic. The topic is usually presented to the participants (verbally or in written form) as a series of questions (Wilkinson, 1998a). According to Munday (2014), a focus group at its most basic, is a small

group discussion centred around a specific topic which is facilitated by a researcher (or a moderator). Kitzinger (1994) clarifies that a group discussion is 'focused' in the sense that it involves collective activity (such as reading a newspaper clipping or viewing a video clip, or debating a set of questions). The third study of this research involves mini-focus groups as the method for data collection. Here, I will briefly discuss the reasoning behind the choice of mini-focus groups over other methods such as in-depth interviewing, though I will not be discussing here the specific mechanics of how mini-focus groups were specifically used in this research (see chapter 7.2 for a detailed discussion of the sampling process, ethical considerations and the procedure used in Study 3).

Wilkinson (1998b) exclaims how surprising it is that until the late 1990s, focus groups were more the exception rather than the norm in feminist psychological research. Focus groups were developed as a method in the 1940s by Robert K. Merton for use in social research. However, by the 1970s focus groups became synonymous with market research where they were used to study potential public reception to new products and services (Munday, 2014). Rose (2001) cites how focus groups became increasingly popular in the social sciences, in particular in feminist research in the early twenty-first century. Munday (2014) describes how social scientists are rediscovering focus groups as a method and have become more accepting of focus groups as a primary research method in its own right (compared to previous decades in which it was considered a supplementary method to provide preparatory support for research projects).

It has been suggested that focus groups hold particular appeal with feminist researchers because of their link to ideas of empowerment and feminist praxis (Munday, 2014). Indeed, I felt that this method of data collection is consistent with my own feminist politics in that through employing this method it arguably reduces power inequalities between the researcher and the researched such as through relinquishing researcher control. Rose (2001) observes there is a strand of feminist thought which suggests focus groups are a highly appropriate method for doing feminist research. This is because focus groups are seen to have empowering possibilities and as being compatible with the ideals of and principles which mark participatory research.

Similarly, Wilkinson (1999) argues that focus groups help researchers address issues of feminist praxis, such as through researching the experiences of marginalised groups, the contextualisation of data and addressing the issue of power inequalities between the researcher and the researched. Munday (2014) suggests that focus groups are more appropriate to a social constructionist paradigm due to the method allowing for the study of interaction and how participants come together to negotiate meaning. In particular, in group discussions, women are provided with the space to co-construct and negotiate meanings together, rather than having meanings imposed on them by the researcher. Munday argues that participants' discussions with each other can:

make explicit meanings and realities that were previously hidden, thus promoting a new and greater understanding of their social position as women constrained within patriarchal social structures. (p. 242).

As I already noted in chapter 1, imposing meanings around gender and feminism on my participants was something I was keen to avoid. This meant during group discussions, I would ask the participants open-ended questions such as "what does feminism mean to you?" and provide them the space to discuss this without being judged, as well as 'bounce' ideas off of one another.

Focus groups have been suggested to be a relatively egalitarian research method due to the researcher-to-participants ratio arguably reducing the researcher's power and control and placing it in the hands of the participants (Wilkinson, 1998a). Indeed, Wilkinson argues that in comparison to a one-on-one situation, in a group context it is harder for a researcher to impose her/his own agenda. Further, she contends that this can be an advantage if the research aims are focused on the participants' own meanings and are not interested in constraining participant-directed interaction. Montell (1999) alleges that in a focus group, the typical power relationship between researcher (and their 'expert' framing of the questions) and researched is mitigated by the main interaction being between participants, rather than between each participant and the interviewer. In this space, participants can share their experiences, and even question and challenge each other in order to gain greater understanding.

As Wilkinson (1998b) highlights, feminist psychology rejects the atomistic individualism which tends to mark mainstream psychology and is instead more focused on understanding the person within a social world and the influence of

social context. Wilkinson argues therefore, that research which isolates the individual from the social context is wholly inappropriate. One of the advantages of focus groups over structured interviews is that they allow us to get as close as is possible to 'everyday talk' (Willott and Griffin, 1997) and the discussion is relatively free-flowing (Wilkinson, 1998a). Wilkinson (1998a) describes how in comparison to one-on-one interviews, participants talk primarily to each other and as a result talk in a manner closer to everyday conversation. Munday (2014) suggests that while focus groups cannot be seen as a 'truly' naturalistic method, they can be viewed and analysed as a discrete social context in their own right, and can be viewed as sites through which partial and multiple versions of social 'reality' can be constructed. Caillaud and Kalampalikis (2013) recount how focus groups have been described as a communication space which allow initiation, observation and analysis of interactions. Focus groups are useful in helping researchers to understand not only the content of discussions, but also how social representations are constructed, and the different processes a group went through.

Wilkinson (1998a) refers to focus groups as 'small group discussions' which usually consist of 6-8 participants, who may either be strangers to each other, drawn together for a particular study, or who may be a pre-existing cluster of people (such as colleagues, friends, family members). In market research, the ideal number of participants in a focus group is suggested to be between eight and twelve, however as Munday (2014) points out, there is the potential in such large groups that not all participants will get the opportunity to share their experiences as fully as they wish or even at all. While this limitation is overridden by market research's aim to collect as many views as possible, this is not the aim of my own research. Krueger and Casey (2000) highlight how mini-focus groups (which consist of 4-6 participants) are growing in popularity, due to them providing greater opportunity for *all* participants in a group discussion to talk. In the third study of this research project, I was keen to give all participants as much opportunity to engage in a group discussion as possible and so the mini-focus group format was chosen.

Wilkinson (1998a) contests the 'common assumption' that participants would become inhibited by the presence of others, arguing that the group space can be more supportive (in comparison to one-on-one interviews) thereby fostering

openness and disclosure. Sharing experiences in a group can help women feel more relaxed and feel at ease, thereby enabling them to feel comfortable talking openly (Munday, 2014). Munday highlights how recruiting participants who already know each other for a group can mean participants already feel relaxed with one another, and discussions can be facilitated via prompts referring to shared stories and experiences. Further, Wilkinson (1998a) illustrates how one participant's disclosure encourages other more inhibited participants to disclose similar experiences and views. Rose (2001) suggests that it is the 'away-from-home' (i.e. from husbands, in-laws, children) setting which may help some participants feel more at ease in sharing their experiences. However, Munday (2014) does stress that researchers need to be particularly mindful of any established hierarchies within a group of friends and any patterns of interaction which may impact on the data. This is something which is reflected upon in relation to Study 3 in chapter 9.3.

Like Willott and Griffin (1997), I tended to favour the term 'group discussion' rather than 'focus group' when conversing and communicating with participants (including in recruitment materials). My reasoning for this was to avoid connotations of marketing and business which the term 'focus group' may carry. As Kitzinger and Barbour (1999) point out, the market research model of focus groups was predominant and accepted as the norm for many years, with myths surrounding how focus groups should be conducted being created. Kitzinger and Barbour suggest that as social researchers hold different skills and are interested in generating different types of data to market researchers, they should not feel beholden to 'the Rules' established by market research. While market research treats the focus group as a resource and places emphasis on content at face value, feminist research is interested in the process, how participants co-construct the topic and the context in which constructions are made (Munday, 2014). Focus groups also allow exploration of collective experiences, rather than individual experiences, which sets them apart from a series of interviews. They allow individual experiences to be shared within the group, and as Rose (2001) underlines, this enables group members to arrive via the process of observing and discussing their similarities and/or differences to a collective rationalisation for their beliefs and/or actions.

#### **4.5 Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis**

Methodology refers to the framework within which research is conducted, consisting of theories and practices for how to go about conducting research. A particular methodology bestows assumptions in regard to what counts as research, how to conduct research, and the claims which can be made about collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Data analysis within a qualitative paradigm can cover a range from descriptive and exploratory analysis, to more interrogative, theorised and interpretative analysis. The aim of descriptive analysis is to 'give voice' to a group of people, in particular, groups which little is known about or marginalised groups. Interpretative analysis seeks to go further than this by unpicking participants' accounts and interrogating them in order to gain a deeper understanding. Interpretative analysis looks 'beneath the surface' of data in order to try and comprehend how and why a particular account is generated, rather than take it at face value. Such analysis also aims to provide a conceptual account of the dataset and theorise around this (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It is for these reasons that I was interested in adopting a form of interpretative analysis for analysing my research data. The approach that I considered to be most suited (for reasons that I will discuss below) to analysing the media-text data I collected, as well as the group discussions (mini-focus groups) was feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis which is a pattern-based form of discourse analysis. To clarify, pattern-based forms are interested in the patterns in language use and how these are connected to the social production of reality, as well as how accounts of objects are constructed in particular ways by people (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Discourse analysis is not a method, or even just an approach to qualitative research, but instead it is a whole approach to psychology and knowledge. Discourse analysis developed in British social psychology in the 1980s, as part of a wider 'turn to language', challenging traditional experimental social psychology. Discourse analysis provided an entirely different way of seeing and doing psychology, particularly in terms of shifting the location of psychology from being produced and happening inside people's heads, to being outside the person and beyond into the social world (particularly in terms of social interaction). In sum, discourse analysis is an external approach, based upon the notion that the phenomena psychologists are interested in (such as the self, emotion, prejudice,



gender, and so on) should not be viewed as being private, individual and interior, but as social processes and activities which can be examined at the level of language (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Discourse analysis can be delineated into two broad schools. One of these schools is known by names such as 'discursive psychology', 'interpretative repertoires', 'rhetorical analysis' and 'micro discourse analysis'. This school is interested in the specifics of talk and uses analytic constructs such as rhetoric and so is known as a 'bottom-up' approach. This school is associated with psychologists such as Margaret Wetherell, Jonathan Potter, Michael Billig, and Derek Edwards. The other school, as already mentioned is known by names such as 'Foucauldian discourse analysis', 'poststructuralist discourse analysis', 'macro discourse analysis' and as a 'top-down approach'. Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is heavily influenced by poststructuralist theory and of course the work of Michel Foucault (1976, 1984a, 1984b) and is most closely associated with psychologists Ian Parker and Erica Burman. Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is concerned with discourses, and the ways in which discourses constitute objects and make available certain subject positions. Researchers using feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis employ analytic constructs such as discourses, subjectivity, subject positions, and power (Madill, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis most suits research questions based upon representation and/or constructions which is what my own research is interested in. In addition, there is no ideal type of textual data for feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis which also suits my research as my three datasets have come from magazines, internet blogs, and mini-focus groups. Because feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis draws extensively upon the work of Foucault, it incorporates his concern with the relationships between power and knowledge and this makes it particularly appropriate for my research.

The term 'discourse' was originally drawn from the field of linguistics, in which it was used to refer to a section of speech or writing. In critical social psychology it has a more specific use and is defined as "the product of constructing and the means to construct meaning in a particular way" (Stainton Rogers, 2011, p. 132) and as a "system of statements which constructs an object" (Parker, 1992, p. 5) in a coherent and particular way. The language people use is situated within these meaning systems. An object can be something abstract (such as the self or

gender) or concrete (such as a food item or alcohol) and is the subject of the discourse. What this means is that a discourse provides people with culturally available and shared, patterned ways for talking about an object. Whenever a person talks about an object they are 'drawing on' a discourse which gives the object a particular meaning or shape. Often there will be multiple discourses which exist for a given object, each providing contesting constructions of the object. One or two discourses tend to dominate and constitute the 'taken for granted' truth within society in relation to an object (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Researchers using feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis focus on the availability of discursive resources within a particular culture and the implications for people within that culture. Willig (2001) refers to this as a 'discursive economy'.

Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis theorises language and discourse as constitutive of a person's social and psychological realities. Language is treated primarily as a resource for the constitution of realities and subjectivities, as well as the maintenance and disruption of power relations. This means researchers using feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis tend to adopt an outsider position where it is their concerns which are prioritised (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis investigates how discourses work across settings and situations. Curt (1994, as cited in Stainton Rogers, 2011) asserts that feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is concerned with two key points. One is the textuality of discourse (which refers to the discourse's uses, functions, and ability to wield power), while the second is its sociocultural tectonics (which refers to the way in which different discourses are produced, as well as promoted and maintained and how these vie against, impinge upon, and shape one another). Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is more broad-brush and less fine-grained than micro (or bottom-up) forms of discourse analysis, meaning feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is more concerned with the way discourse operates more generally and globally as a social and cultural resource, rather than the specific details of what people say. Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis does not only interrogate how discourses jockey with and exert power over one another, but also how discourses vary and shift over time and from one location to another (Stainton Rogers, 2011). Critical social psychologists argue that it is important to study who it is that gets to set the

agenda in different cultures and societies, and whose versions of reality and truth are most often accepted within a given society. The kind of research questions which are typical for research involving feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis are “what discourses operate in relation to this topic? Where do they come from? How and why were they constructed? How are they deployed and what can they be used to achieve?” (Stainton Rogers, 2011, p. 138).

#### *4.5.1 Analytical application*

There have been different strategies put forward by critical social psychologists in terms of how to conduct feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis. The data analysis for this research followed the method put forward by Willott and Griffin (1997). Their method (involving seven steps) draws on both Foucauldian discourse analysis and constructivist grounded analysis, and is set within a feminist framework. The data was initially read and re-read in order to familiarise myself with the data. This was followed by Step 1: breaking the data into ‘chunks’ (chunks being a series of interactions within the text discussing a topic and ending with a shift in topic) also known as ‘chunking the data’. Step 2: Each chunk was coded using single-word in-vivo themes (e.g. ‘career’, ‘relationships’, ‘marriage’, ‘sex’). Step 3: All chunks which fell under a single theme were gathered together into a theme cluster. Step 4: the gathered chunks were examined for the different ways in which the theme was talked about by participants. Each ‘way of talking about the theme’ was represented on an index card. Relationships were mapped out between the different ‘ways of talking about the theme’, as well as the interrelations between them (e.g. similarities, differences). This process produced discourses and enabled me to identify discursive patterns. Step 5: a process of refining the discursive patterns identified, such as through scrutinising discourses which did not ‘hang well’ together or dissecting elements from some discourses and merging them with others if it made more sense to do so. Step 6: involved using the ‘ways of talking about a theme’ to develop theoretical accounts of repeated discursive patterns.

The above steps by Willott and Griffin (1997) were followed during analysis for Studies 1 and 2. By the time I had collected the data for Study 3 and was moving

onto analysis, I decided to follow these steps more 'loosely' and less rigidly. By this I mean, rather than collating the chunks by theme onto A3 card and writing the 'ways of talking about' the themes onto index cards to create a 'web', I followed these steps using lists, highlighters and identifying markers (numbers to aid cross-referencing and tracking of which chunk came from which data). The reason for this is I was concerned that in the process of analysing the datasets for Studies 1 and 2, I had become too 'bogged down' in the finer details of the data, rather than focusing on the 'bigger picture'. I was also concerned about becoming too adherent to following the steps of a method. 'Methodolatry' is something qualitative researchers such as Chamberlain (2000) have expressed concern about. Chamberlain (2000) suggests that new and developing qualitative researchers can become inhibited and falsely reliant on method-driven prescriptions, which while appropriate for some approaches (such as thematic analysis), can result in a cautious and 'safe' analysis rather than one of deeper critical engagement. Watts (2014) raises concerns regarding how psychologists have, historically, aspired for the discipline to align with the natural sciences, resulting in quantitative research continuing to be the standard against which other modes of research (read: qualitative) are evaluated. In line with this is the belief that the acquisition of knowledge demands forms of questioning which are consistent, reliable and repetitive. In relation to qualitative research where such matters are less clear (than with quantitative research), Watts argues this has led to the reification and policing of the application of methods. Similarly, Brinkmann (2015) contends that such reification and standardisation conflicts with a branch of psychology characterised by inductive and imaginative processes, flexibility, an emphasis on contextual experience, and an interest in emergent meaning-making. Watts (2014) notes how many texts outlining approaches and conduct relating to specific qualitative methods have been published since the 1980s. Watts expresses concern that, while such texts are designed to be helpful, they may be read by those inexperienced in qualitative research as implying that it is the stringent application of method which is at the core of qualitative research, and further, that it is the application of a particular method in and of itself which will produce the most interesting findings. Watts' main concern here, is that new and developing qualitative researchers become inhibited and falsely reliant on method-driven prescriptions which can result in bland description rather than deeper critical engagement with data. Both Watts (2014) and Brinkmann (2015) advocate researchers building up their 'craft' of qualitative inquiry, which

Brinkmann suggests should be developed creatively and through practice, rather than becoming mired in rigid rules and procedures. I feel that 'allowing' myself to 'loosen' up in terms of how I followed Willott and Griffin's (1997) analytical steps, helped me to grow in confidence in conducting discourse analysis.

As part of this growth in confidence, when analysing data for Study 3, I incorporated into Willott and Griffin's (1997) Step 6 (developing a theoretical account of a discursive pattern) a consideration of three dimensions (of genealogy, power, and subject positions) as recommended by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) in relation to the discourses identified. The reasoning behind this was because I saw space for a more in-depth analysis and I argue that incorporating these dimensions within Willott and Griffin's Step 6 enhanced my analysis of the mini-focus groups dataset. After completing analysis of Study 3 and writing up the findings, I then chose to go back to the write-up for the findings for both Study 1 and Study 2. I then incorporated the dimensions into my theoretical account for the discursive patterns identified for those two studies.

In their chapter in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) outline three dimensions which researchers should be sensitive to when analysing a dataset. These three dimensions are genealogy, power, and subjectification (subject positions). I will discuss each of these in greater detail below.

#### 4.5.2 Genealogy

Analysts employing feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis are concerned with the role of discourses in wider social processes of both legitimation and power. Dominant discourses privilege the particular versions of reality which legitimate existing power relations and social structures, as well as shaping subjectivities. As discourses become entrenched in society, it can become very difficult for people to see how they could challenge them and so certain discourses become 'common sense' or 'truth' (Willig, 2008). Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is concerned with identifying the multiple and differing discourses which are in play around a particular object, event, or phenomenon. Stainton Rogers (2011) offers the example of the case of

Kitty Genovese, a woman who was stabbed to death in New York in 1964. It was claimed at the time by *The New York Times* that there were approximately 38 witnesses to the event who did not intervene and failed to come to the aid of Genovese. As Stainton Rogers (2011) highlights, such a case can be read in several different ways drawing upon different discourses. Examples she gives include 'bystander apathy' (a 'psy' discourse), 'sexist misogyny' (a feminist discourse), and 'society in tatters' (a neoliberal discourse). Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis takes this kind of taxonomy as its starting point, and then maps out the discourses "in play in rhetorical competition between competing ways of 'making sense'" (p. 132). This is known as historical inquiry, or in Foucauldian terms, as genealogy. What I feel is key here to a Foucauldian understanding of genealogy is that to conduct a genealogical analysis is not to be aiming for the 'one truth' (such as in regards to eating disorders), nor is it about 'discovering' falsehoods which are designed to conceal a 'truth' about something (e.g. sex). Instead, Foucault (1976) focuses on asking 'why' there are different claims to knowledge of what is 'true'. Foucault exhorts that genealogy is not a way of saying that everyone else is wrong (1969), nor is it aimed at showing a discourse to be a mistake (1976), but rather the aim is to contextualise the discourse. His goal is to examine how a discourse operates, the history of the discourse, the effects and consequences of the discourse, and any connections and relationships existing between different discourses. It is important to note that Foucault is not trying to establish a new body of knowledge, but rather trying to unsettle taken-for-granted ways of thinking. This in turn can then free people to recognise how authoritative knowledge is socially constituted, and can also clear space for people to re-imagine their subjectivity in new ways (Saukko, 2003).

Genealogy involves investigating the origins of a specific discourse, and then tracing the 'life history' of this discourse through different times and different locations, in order to come to an overall understanding of the discourse's operations in the 'here and now' (Stainton Rogers, 2011). The ways in which we understand and interpret the world depend on when and where we live. This means that all ways of understanding are culturally and historically relative. Not only are these ways of knowing specific to a particular location and time, they are also products of that culture and history and are dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements which prevail in that society in that time

period (Burr, 2015). According to Burr (2015), the particular forms of knowledge which abound in any culture are artefacts of that culture, and therefore we should not assume that the knowledge and ways of understanding from our own time and location are any better or any nearer to the 'truth', than the ways of understanding from other locations and/or time periods. I feel this point is crucial to conducting a genealogical analysis of discourses, as this is what differentiates genealogy from mere historical inquiry or what Saukko (2003) refers to as 'history of origins'. Saukko highlights the example of Brumberg's (1988) work on the emergence of anorexia. When Brumberg examined the early history of women's self-starvation, her analysis could be described as genealogical because she maps how the different discourses (religious, scientific, and psychiatric) constitute the object differently. However, when Brumberg moves onto examining the Victorian period, her analysis is no longer genealogical. Saukko argues that her analysis shifts from investigating the way in which certain historical and institutional discourses constituted anorexia, to 'discovering' the 'origins' of anorexia. Brumberg's description of understandings of anorexia in the nineteenth century is very close to contemporary notions and Brumberg at this point switches to writing as though this was what anorexia 'really' is. Saukko claims that Brumberg's slippage between genealogy and history of origins illustrates the specificity of genealogical analysis: "the traditional history of 'origins' legitimates the present by finding its roots in the past" (p. 118). Saukko emphasises that the purpose of genealogy is to challenge the present and that it requires:

A careful reading of historical details, not in terms of the truths they tell (What was madness like before?) but in terms of the truths that they constitute (How did we begin to perceive certain behaviours and people as 'mad'?). (p. 118).

Rather than speculate about individuals' and institutions' past motivations, genealogy concentrates on *how* those motivations are constituted. According to Saukko (2003), genealogy concentrates on historical specificity for two reasons. First, genealogy investigates how a particular idea emerges from particular historical circumstances, thereby demonstrating that this idea is not a 'timeless truth'. Second, genealogy explores what historical circumstances and agendas gave rise to an idea. This then allows us to evaluate the kinds of social and political projects it supports.

To carry out a genealogical analysis of the data, Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) explain that an analyst must first recognise discourse as a 'corpus of

statements', the organisation of which is relatively regular and systematic. According to Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, a corpus of statements would not only include a variety of discourses, but also incorporate discourses which are historically variable. They elucidate that this temporal variability is important for showing how a given object has been spoken about differently in different periods of history. It can also demonstrate how an object has been exposed to different forms of regulation, reform, and punishment. Each discourse should form the 'conditions of possibility' for the studied phenomenon in order to bind the corpus of statements together. A corpus of statements aims to adequately reflect the diversity of discursive practices and allow an analyst to trace the discourses' transformation over time and across different spaces.

#### 4.5.3 Power

Researchers using a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis generally have a strong interest in power and in contesting and challenging dominant and powerful knowledges. Language and discourse is essential to the operation of power by producing meanings, processes, and categories in society. The work of Foucault is fundamental to our understanding of power. Foucault argued that power in our everyday lives is not solely, or even predominantly exercised in an overt form such as through ruling figures (e.g. the monarchy or government) asserting their authority by punishing those who challenge it (see *Discipline and Punish*, 1975). Foucault theorised power as being not some 'massive force', but rather as a 'dense network' which is woven into the day-to-day lives of people and their relationships. Foucault referred to this as the 'micro-politics of power' due to his contention that power operates far more extensively and to a greater degree in small and everyday ways than it does in larger, more formalised and explicit ways. Power tends to manifest in small-scale personal (such as in relation to beauty practices) and inter-personal relationships (such as in a marriage). Foucault believed that these 'dense networks of power' are governed by institutions such as the state, the church, medicine, and psychiatry (Stainton Rogers, 2011). Feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is used to 'tease' out 'what is going on' in the small, local, everyday, often intimate processes by which power is exercised, as well as resisted in people's relationships (Stainton Rogers, 2011). Researchers using feminist-informed



poststructuralist discourse analysis also ask difficult questions about the motivations and consequences involved in the micro-politics of power. For instance, one such question could be who stands to gain if people take-for-granted that women deserve beauty treatments and that their worth is measured by them practicing these (Stainton Rogers, 2011).

In his work, Foucault treated power as productive (power produces knowledge rather than represses or oppresses it) and relational (as operating between people and institutions) (Braun & Clarke, 2013). According to Foucault (1976), the production of power can sometimes have the function of prohibiting, discursive production can administer silences, and the propagation of knowledge can cause mistaken beliefs and/or systematic misconceptions to circulate. This ties in with genealogy, as Foucault was interested in tracing the history of these instances and transformations. To Foucault: "Silence itself [...] is less the absolute limit of discourse [...] than an element that functions alongside the things said" (p. 27). Foucault states that there is not one silence, but many silences, and these are integral to the strategies which underlie and permeate discourses. He argues that we need to determine the different ways of 'not saying things', as well as how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed. In line with this we also need to determine which types of discourse are authorised.

The process of power as productive operates through what Foucault referred to as the 'technology of the self'. Foucault claimed that we produce our selves through treating the self as a technological project, as an entity which must not only be constructed, but also constantly maintained. While on the surface these projects of the self may seem benign, Foucault saw them as being governed by society's institutions. An example of this can be found in relation to the psyche which since the 1940s has been intimately bound up with rationales and techniques of government. The psyche has been opened up for exploration, cultivation, and regulation via many routes and channels. A variety of therapeutic techniques have been constructed to help individuals ease their distress (such as psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, person-centered therapy, among many others). Therapeutic vocabularies began to be increasingly applied in various other spheres in life such as General Practice surgeries, schools, and personnel and Human Resource departments. From here, psychotherapeutic language is transplanted further afield via mass media. Magazines have advice

columns, radio stations have 'phone ins', bookshops have self-help sections. The therapeutic imperative encourages people to confess their most intimate problems and have them analysed and dissected. There is now a climate in which politicians, practitioners, and the media celebrate the emancipatory potential of therapy to solve the problems of the world (Rose, 1999).

Foucault (1976) suggests that governments perceived themselves as not simply dealing with 'subjects' or even a 'people', but with a 'population', and with this population its peculiar variables, such as rates of birth, death, fertility, and patterns of diet, habituation and ill health. According to Foucault, while governments had long asserted that the population of a country was connected to wealth and power; the eighteenth century was the first time the future of a country was seen as tied not only to the number of citizens, their 'uprightness', their marriage rules and family organisation, but also to the manner in which an individual makes use of their sex. In this context, a discourse in which the population's sexual conduct was treated simultaneously as an object of analysis and a target for intervention took hold. Here, sex became a public issue, around which a web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses and injunctions became woven. Foucault emphasises that it is not a single discourse on sex, but a multiplicity of discourses which are produced by a series of mechanisms operating in various institutions. Discourses do not multiply in a separate space, nor do they arise independently from (or against) power. Instead they rise as a means of the exercise of power.

Foucault (1976) shows in his work how in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a discursive explosion and sex became placed under the rule of the 'normal' and the 'pathological' (medicalisation). Many centres began to produce discourses on sex, including education, medicine, psychiatry, criminal justice, and social controls. In this context, an everyday occurrence could become the subject of any one of these centres, such as in the form of medical intervention or clinical examination. Sex would derive its meaning and necessity from medical interventions. 'Irregular sexuality' (read: anything that does not fall under the banner of heterosexual monogamy) came under scrutiny and became a specific dimension in the field of sexuality. 'Medicalisation' of the 'sexually peculiar' was both the effect and instrument of a power which demanded examinations and observation. With this came a technology of health and

pathology and the installation of devices of surveillance. This machinery of power does not aim to suppress the sexualities under its focus, but instead gives it an analytical, visible and permanent reality. Sex became a thing that was not simply to be condemned or tolerated, but managed, recorded, logged, and regulated for the greater good. It had to be inserted into systems of utility and made to function in line with an optimum. In other words, sex was not simply judged, but rather something that was administered and managed.

Foucault (1976) questions why power is not recognised except in the form of the juridical and prohibition. In the West, since the medieval period, power has been formulated as 'law'. Foucault suggests that power is only tolerated if it masks most of itself. He explains how new methods of power are operated by technique, normalisation, and control. Power is everywhere, it is in every relation. Indeed, power is the multiplicity of forms of relations. Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority, but are immanent to other types of relationship. No one (i.e. no individual ruler, politician, or government) is said to invent these relations of power, nor does anyone admit to formulating them. While social control is usually implicit and uncoded, it can also be institutionalised through law and legislation which can exert immense control over a person's freedom in terms of how they construct themselves. The 'self' we can build is stringently constrained by this covert exercise of power (Stainton Rogers, 2011). Foucault did not only use the term 'institutional control' to refer to formal institutions, he also included less formal elements such as public opinion and peer pressure. A further element which Foucault identified is 'self-regulation'. Foucault argued that self-regulation is the main way in which control is exercised. Institutions only need to directly and overtly exercise their governmental power occasionally and superficially, because through self-regulation, people come to act as if they are under constant scrutiny (even when they are not most of the time). Foucault claimed that the mere fact that institutions have power and can exercise it is enough to control what people do. This means that the selves produced through technologies of the self are highly regulated and governed (Stainton Rogers, 2011). Discourses are bound up with institutional practices, and so while discourses legitimate and reinforce existing social structures, in turn these structures support and validate the discourses (Willig, 2008). Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) differentiate between 'technology of self' and what they refer to as 'technology of power'. To them technologies of power govern human conduct at a distance, whilst

technologies of the self are techniques by which people self-regulate and enhance their own conduct. Tied in with this is the notion of 'confession'. Foucault (1976) recounts how in the West in the medieval period, confession became established as one of the main rituals relied upon for the production of 'truth'. By the nineteenth century, the West had become a singularly confessing society, whereby the 'truthful confession' was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualisation by power. At some point during this period, confession metamorphoses from a narration of the 'trials' of bravery or sainthood, towards us 'pouring out our souls'. Foucault suggests the obligation to confess is so deeply ingrained in Western society that it is no longer seen as the effect of a power that constrains people.

Another key concept generated by Foucault is 'governmentality' which refers to the ways in which institutions and societies regulate and control individuals via the promotion of the idea of the 'good citizen'. The idea of the 'good citizen' is promoted as a role people are expected to aspire to. It is also used to control an individual's 'deservingness' for access to various services, freedoms and levels of autonomy and choice (Stainton Rogers, 2011). An example of this can be found in relation to contemporary debates around obesity and access to NHS services. The concept of governmentality has been refined by Nikolas Rose (1996) who argues that it is the social sciences, and psychology in particular, which has engaged the most in governmentality. Rose (1979) conceived the term 'psy complex' (often shortened to just 'psy') to describe the cluster of disciplines and praxes centered around psychology, psychiatry, and psychotherapy. These disciplines, he argues, have become increasingly powerful in the influence they have over the lives of ordinary people's day-to-day lives. Rose's work has focused on the critical examination of how 'psy' has developed, transformed and proliferated and become bound up with government and the technologies for governing conduct. However, Rose (1996) contends that governmentality does not just constitute regimes intent on control and discipline; it also encompasses strategies to encourage people to become healthier, happier, more intelligent, and more productive. To Rose, governmentality is not just about exploitation, but also can be equally conceived as 'humaneering' whereby knowledge of human nature underpins directives for social change. Foucault also emphasised in his writing that the exercise of power is never simple, nor unidirectional in its impact. People can and do resist, and resistance can be exercised in a number of ways.

The concept of resistance portrays people as capable of countering the deployment of social control through discourse. Stainton Rogers (2011) argues that the concept of resistance is one of Foucault's most potent and important ideas because it offers a positive perspective on how resistance can be made more effective through collective action.

#### *4.5.4 Subject positions*

Some important concepts to bring in here are 'subjectification' and 'subject positioning'. Subjectification refers to the productive practices through which 'subjects' are produced (subjects such as psychology, or people-as-subjects). According to Stainton Rogers (2011) "subjectification is, literally, to 'make subject' or 'make subject to' a particular form of power, as in a Queen and her subjects" (p. 417). As already discussed above, power is exercised in the same way at all levels – always with a legislative power on one side (e.g. a monarch, the state, a parent, master) and on the other side an obedient subject (e.g. vassal, citizen, child, disciple). Power operates according to mechanisms of law and censorship, and from the agencies of social domination, down to the structures which constitute the subject. The subject who is constituted as 'subjected' when confronted by power that is law, is the subject who obeys. However, it is important to remember that power is not static, straight forward, and unidirectional. A subject who is powerless in one context (e.g. a pupil), may be able to exercise power over their teacher in another context. Power is not something that is 'held' by or residing within particular individuals (e.g. politicians). Rather, power is everywhere, and comes from everywhere (Foucault, 1976). Analysts using a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analytical approach are interested in identifying which subjects are produced, as well as how they are produced and why they are produced (Stainton Rogers, 2011). Analysts are also interested in the self and 'subjectivity', and understand these as not being unitary or coherent (as it is seen in mainstream experimental psychology), but rather as fragmented and contradictory (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The ways people think, feel, act, and experience is theorised by feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis as being produced by discourses which are made available to people within their social contexts. Discourses make available

(while precluding others) certain ways of seeing and understanding the world and how we see ourselves in relation to it and these are known as 'subject positions' (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Discourses offer positions which people can take up (or resist and/or reject) in relation to an object (such as gender) and these are known as 'subject positions' (Davies & Harré, 1990). People can also place others within particular subject positions. This in turn, both enables and constrains the ways an individual can understand themselves, their subjectivity, and which of their desires and practices can be seen as possible. 'Subject positioning' refers to where a person is positioned through strategies of regulation. An example that feminist theorists have pointed out is that society only offers women the choice of two positions to occupy: 'madonna', or 'whore'. This restriction of available subject positions for women is argued to exercise an extreme level of control over women, as it also denies women the possibility of occupying alternative positions such as politician, scientist, or entrepreneur (Stainton Rogers, 2011). In his work on the history of sexuality, Foucault (1976) identified new 'personages' or subject positions which began to make their appearance in the eighteenth century when sex became psychologised. Examples of subject positions he identified include 'the indifferent mother', 'the hysterical woman', 'the masturbating child', 'the Malthusian couple', and 'the perverse adult'.

Willig (2008) points out that subject positions are different from 'roles' as subject positions offer discursive locations from which to speak and act. Taking up a subject position has direct implications for a person's subjectivity, whereas a role can be played without subjective identification. According to Davies and Harré (1999, as cited in Willig, 2008), once an individual has taken up a particular subject position, they inevitably see the world from the vantage point of this position. Therefore, they see the world in terms of particular images, storylines, and concepts which are made relevant by the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. An aim of feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis is to examine the 'discursive worlds' which people are located within, as well as to interrogate and theorise these discursive worlds in relation to how they enable or constrain particular 'subject positions' and practices (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Foucault (1976) proposes that where there is power, there is resistance. It should be noted that resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power

because there is no absolute outside where power is concerned. The relational character of power relationships depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance which are present everywhere across the power network. This means there is no central locus of a 'great Refusal', no central source of all revolutions, rebellions and protest. Rather, there is a plurality of resistances, which by definition can only exist within the strategic field of power relations.

#### **4.6 Summary of the chapter and final remarks**

In this chapter, I described characteristics of qualitative research methods and critical social psychology in order to demonstrate the diversity of qualitative and critical approaches. I then provided an overview of the ontological and epistemological positioning of my research, as well the theoretical framework informing the decisions made in terms of methods of data collection and analysis. I discussed Foucault's ideas in relation to feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis and discussed the three analytical dimensions (genealogy, power, and subject positions) my analysis paid attention to. Here, I feel it is important to note that I will go into detail in relation to the specific data collection methods I used and explain how I conducted these for each of my three studies in their respective chapters.

## **CHAPTER 5 - STUDY 1: 'FUN, FEARLESS FEMALES'? IDENTIFYING DISCOURSES AROUND GENDER AND FEMINISM IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES**

### **5.1 Introduction**

#### *5.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The main purpose of this chapter is to present the first research study conducted for this thesis. Study 1 identifies and examines the discourses (relating to gender and feminism) made available in women's monthly magazines. These were investigated through a media text study using feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis<sup>14</sup> (e.g. Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008). The first part of this chapter outlines the data collection methods used in Study 1. This involves first explaining the reasoning behind the sample group selected for this study; followed by a description of the sampling process and collection of data.

In the second part of this chapter, the construction and deployment of each discourse identified in the magazine dataset from Study 1 will be presented and discussed. Three discourses were identified as operating across the magazine dataset: 1) "Girls just want to have fun": a postfeminist discourse of 'Girl Power' and the 'phallic girl', 2) "Cause I depend on me": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of self-improvement, personal responsibility and self-surveillance, 3) "All you need is love": a traditionalist discourse of 'necessary heterosexuality', 'reproductive destiny' and romance.

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<sup>14</sup> The three dimensions (genealogy, power, and subject positions) which guided the approach to analysis of the data are described in chapter 4.



## 5.2 Method of data collection

### 5.2.1 Sampling of material for analysis

Before sampling and data collection took place, the research was given ethical approval by the Local Research Ethics Co-ordinator for Psychology at Leeds Beckett University.

Several decisions were made during the process of sampling magazines for Study 1. It was decided that women's magazines would be sampled due to magazines being a widespread and persistently popular medium (Gill, 2007a). Studying magazines can provide insight into constructions of femininity and women's social position (Morant, 1998). Morant (1998) proposes that the continued success of magazines could be linked to the reassurance they provide women readers in constructing and negotiating their subjectivities.

The initial decisions made concerned the type of magazine to be selected in terms of publication frequency (e.g. monthly or weekly) and focus of content (e.g. celebrity gossip, hobby, specialist, lifestyle, fashion or a combination of these). It was decided that the selected magazine would be one which is published monthly and aimed at 18-30 year old women. Magazines which were weekly (e.g. *Grazia*, *Closer*, *Now*, *Reveal* and *Heat*) were excluded from the sample. This is because they tend to have shorter articles (1 page), whereas monthly magazines tend to have longer articles (3-6 pages) and would arguably provide richer data for analysis. Magazines which are aimed at women over the age of 30 (e.g. *Woman*, *My Weekly* and *Yours*) or under 18 (e.g. *Shout*, *Girl Talk*, and *Mizz*) were excluded due to the focus of my research overall being on young women<sup>15</sup>. Also, speciality/hobby magazines such as those focused on 'pop psychology', television soaps, crafts, and spiritual matters/astrology (e.g. *Psychologies*, *Spirit and Destiny*, *Knitting & Crochet*, *Ideal Home*, *Homes & Gardens*) were also excluded from the sample. This was in the interests of purposive sampling, because the focus in hobby magazines is too narrow and arguably niche, and therefore would likely contain a lot of material which would not directly reflect the aims of the research.

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<sup>15</sup> The sample group for Study 3 (focus groups) consisted of 18-30 year old women.

The first step taken in selecting the specific magazines involved examining circulation figures for women's magazines in the UK. This information was drawn from an online resource called Press Gazette (Ponsford, 2010) which listed the 36 women's magazines with the highest circulation figures. These 36 magazines were entered into a grid with their corresponding circulation figures (see appendix 1). Other key criteria relating to each magazine, such as publication frequency, target demographic and content focus were also entered. Another criterion included the mode of distribution, as selected magazines needed to be ones which could be purchased from retailers such as newsagents, book stores and supermarkets. Magazines which were free and/or distributed only online were not included in the sample as the focus of Study 1 was on print-based media and not online formats. In line with this, websites used to promote the magazines selected were also not sampled. There are also issues when comparing magazines' circulation figures such as how freely-distributed magazines could potentially have disproportionately higher circulation figures than those which require payment making it more difficult to directly compare them. For example, *Stylist* is distributed for free in city railway stations and is paired with another magazine called *Shortlist*. Due to how the two magazines are often handed out to individuals as a pair, there is no way of knowing how many copies are distributed to people who are only interested in reading *Shortlist* and therefore do not read the copy of *Stylist*. As a result, *Stylist* was not included in the sample.

The five magazines with the highest circulation figures which matched the key criteria (being published on a monthly-basis, currently in print, a target demographic of 18-30, and having a focus on lifestyle) were selected. The five magazines selected were: *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Red*, and *Company* (see Table 1). It was decided to select five magazines in order to examine a range of sources and gather enough data for analysis. It was important to sample from a range in order to identify patterns of discourses which appear across the best-selling magazines. If a single magazine (e.g. *Glamour*) was sampled than this could mean that any discourses identified could be argued to be specific to that magazine (or even issue) alone (Morant, 1998). A larger number of magazines was not sampled because examining larger numbers of magazines would have been unmanageable and would have resulted in fewer articles being sampled from each one.

Magazines were purchased from retailers including newsagents and supermarkets across three months in 2011: March, April and May (as listed in Table 1 below). This decision was based on Morant's (1998) guidance that all sampled magazines should come from the same month(s) to ensure that any variations over time are held constant.

*Table 1: Targeted magazine titles and the number of articles sampled from each title.*

<b>Magazines</b>	<b>Issues collected (by date)</b>	<b>Total number of articles sampled</b>
Glamour	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Cosmopolitan	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Marie Claire	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Red	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Company	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
<b>Total units of meaning collected</b>		<b>30</b>

For the purposes of sampling, it was decided that one unit of analysis would consist of one complete article (as opposed to a single page from an article). This decision is based on Morant's guidance which explains how in qualitative research the concern is with capturing the systems of meaning conveyed within data and so units of meaning do not necessarily need to be equivalent in length as with quantitative research. While 'segmenting' data into lines or paragraphs allows for more fine-grained analysis, there is a risk of losing the semantic coherence of an article which was created as an integrated whole. This research

uses a 'top-down' form of discourse analysis as the focus is on broader patterns (and not on fine-grained analysis of text), and so segmenting articles into 'small bites' would be inappropriate and unnecessary. Morant's (1998) guidance suggests media text studies should aim to collect between 15 and 40 units of meaning. She also notes that this number depends on the substance of the material being collected. This means, for example, if units collected are predominantly long then less units need to be collected and vice versa. Morant suggests that if all the sampled articles are particularly long (e.g. more than seven pages) then sampling 20 articles would provide a huge amount of data and could result in a less detailed analysis being conducted. In the case of this particular study, 30 units from magazines were selected as it was decided to select articles which were on average 1-4 pages in length rather than shorter pieces which were half a page or less (e.g. advice columns, tips in text boxes, readers' letters, etc).

Selection criteria for choosing articles were developed while keeping the aims of the research in mind which was to explore constructions around gender and feminism. Articles were also selected based on length as full articles were preferred in order to generate rich data rather than 'snippets' of text (e.g. lists and tips). Articles selected were all a minimum of one page in length. Reader input such as letters, text messages and problem pages were excluded. This was because the majority of reader input was very short and would not provide rich enough data to analyse. Advertisements, and fashion and beauty 'spreads' were excluded. This is because these features tend to be purely image-based with no accompanying text other than information regarding where to purchase items shown (such as dresses, handbags, lipstick, and so on) and the prices of products. Selected articles had a focus on lifestyle, careers and relationships. Hobby-based articles such as food recipes, travel guides, exercise and diet plans were excluded as these appeared in some of the magazines sampled (e.g. *Red* and *Marie Claire* which target women aged 20-40) but not in others (e.g. *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Company*). The aim was to collect a diverse range of article types (e.g. features on career, health, relationships with men, and friendships) rather than focusing on one specific type (e.g. relationships).

Individual magazine issues were combed through for articles in page order, from front cover to back cover. All pages which did not fit into the selection criteria

were discarded. All articles which were identified as shedding light on the aims of the study were initially selected. As this generated an unmanageable number of units, this was whittled down to six articles per magazine by choosing longer articles in favour of shorter one-page articles. All selected articles were scanned and saved as .pdf files which could be read using Adobe Acrobat Reader to aid ease of analysis. Articles were also printed for the analytic process. Before moving on to present the findings from Study 1, I will remind the reader briefly of the analytic process used. As described in chapter 4, the data was analysed using a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis. This involved reading with sensitivity to three dimensions (genealogy, power, and subject positions) as outlined by Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008). Using genealogy, I explored where a particular discourse comes from, why it has arisen and whose interests it served (or still serves). I also identified how each discourse positions people in relations of power, the functions a discourse serves, the subject positions a discourse makes available and the consequences of the discourse (such as any limitations or restrictions it places on a particular group of people).

### **5.3 “Girls just want to have fun”: a postfeminist discourse of ‘girl power’ and the ‘phallic girl’**

A discursive pattern that can be found running across the data set is a postfeminist discourse. In the different magazines sampled, the notion of ‘girl power’ was invoked by participants to suggest women have greater freedoms in contemporary Britain:

#### **Extract 1**

The 1990s brought us many things – great hip-hop, puffa jackets and the Spice Girls. And, if the Spice Girls taught us anything, it was Girl Power. Women were suddenly bolder, braver and boozier than ever. Ordering a beer didn’t make you a lesbian, and bedding more than a handful of men didn’t make you a slag.  
(Company, March 2011, p. 52).

In contemporary media culture, feminist-inspired ideas can be found to be expressed within television, radio and print media, rather than being only external, critical voices as was the case up until the late 1980s (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007b). However, this is not to suggest that the media has become feminist

nor that it has adopted feminist perspectives uncritically, but rather that it has incorporated and enmeshed both feminist *and* anti-feminist ideas (Gill, 2007b). Gill (2007b) discusses how through postfeminist discourse, feminist ideas are articulated and expressed at the same time as being disavowed and repudiated. This is what McRobbie (2009) refers to as a 'double entanglement'.

In extract 1, *Company* constructs post-1990s life in Britain as being great for young women and ascribes this as being the result of 'Girl Power'. Girl Power is cited as having helped improve 'women's lot' in terms of enabling them to drink alcohol and have sexual relations with numerous men, both without consequences. This can be seen when *Company* writes: "Ordering a beer didn't make you a lesbian, and bedding more than a handful of men didn't make you a slag". As *Company* states: "And, if the Spice Girls taught us anything, it was Girl Power", and in genealogical terms, 'girl power' as a discourse was introduced by British pop girl group the Spice Girls. The rhetoric of 'girl power' encourages young women to pursue their dreams and aspirations, to seek self-definition through self-expression and is underpinned by individualism (Whelehan, 2000). 'Girl power', according to Whelehan (2000), played on the belief in the late 1990s that society was equal and full of opportunities available to all women, a belief that Whelehan argues was illusory. She feels that Girl Power added to this illusion by asserting that not only are women 'in control' of their lives, but that it offered a more liberatory message than feminism, which at the time was undergoing a backlash (Faludi, 1993; Oakley, 1998).

However, the discourse of 'girl power' arguably constitutes part of the backlash with the Spice Girls suggesting that feminism needed a "kick up the arse" (as quoted in Whelehan, 2000, p. 45). This seems to be apparent in the data when it is suggested that women who embrace 'girl power' (and with it postfeminist ideals such as self-sufficiency and independence) are not attractive to men in the same way 'girlie-girls' (girls who embrace traditional notions of 'femininity') are. Indeed, it is implied by *Company* that: "My self-sufficiency puts paid to any feminine mystique I may have had. Men find my ease around other boys threatening and my vulgarity entertaining but a HUGE turn-off. But why is it that the girlie girls get the fellas?" Here, the dimension of power is being played out in interesting ways. 'Girl power' is constituted with downsides, as it is suggested that men view smart, funny and football-loving independent women as potential friends rather than as

potential partners: “They’re {her friends} what I imagine men would think of as ideal. And men *do*... but as the ideal mate”. It is implied here that ‘girl power’ rhetoric such as empowerment, independence and self-sufficiency could be a barrier to heterosexual relationships. This is problematic in the sense that it appears to be taking on the form of a ‘cautionary tale’ to women, warning them of the ‘dangers’ of being independent and empowered. As noted earlier, postfeminism incorporates a double-entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas and this can be seen here in the way it is implied that what women want is a heterosexual relationship with a man. This can be seen in how the only subject positions being offered to women here is that of ‘date’ or ‘mate’, and it is the former which is presented as being the desirable position for women to occupy. These two subject positions are also constructed in terms of gendered characteristics. ‘Dates’ are constructed as being traditionally feminine (and presumably demure) ‘girlie girls’, and ‘mates’ are constructed as ‘ladettes’ adopting what are seen as traditionally masculine traits such as independence, self-sufficiency, a sense of humour, and an affinity for sport. This ‘cautionary tale’ serves to suggest to women that being independent and self-sufficient could ultimately lead to loneliness.

In other examples across the data, ‘girl power’ is invoked as a positive ideal, as can be seen in extract 2 below:

#### Extract 2

On top of presents for the bride, food, drinks, travel, hotels, awful activities and extra-awful outfits, it seems hen-zillas’ spending expectations are out of control. Not that I’m a Scrooge (honest!), although sacrificing that Mulberry handbag in favour of doing yet another pole-dancing class in Edinburgh is bound to make you slightly bitter (true example).

It seems sad that the real girl-power spirit of my first hen-do experience has been lost. In the fight to organise the weekend of a lifetime for the bride, the hen-zilla has forgotten about making it actually fun for everyone else. Be it gobbling up your cash, time or dignity, they’ll stop at nothing to out (hen) do themselves, which leaves the rest of us having to pack a thick skin along with those penis straws.  
(Cosmopolitan, April 2011, p. 42).

This extract draws on components of postfeminist discourse in its depiction of how women spend time together through drinking alcohol, taking pole-dancing lessons, and showing hints of sexual availability (e.g. the use of “those penis

straws"). This conjures up the image of the 'ladette' (women who emulate 'masculine' behaviours such as being boisterous, sexually promiscuous, and heavy drinkers of alcohol) and women embracing 'raunch culture' (Whelehan, 2000; Levy, 2005). Like with the extract from *Company*, here *Cosmopolitan* constructs the young woman as desiring of heterosexual relationships, or rather here it is more heterosexual sex (implied through the reference to "yet another pole-dancing class" whereby women can learn skills to perform and entertain their man). The hen night is held up here as: "the weekend of a lifetime" and as something that is supposed to be imbued with "the real girl-power spirit". However, it is suggested in this extract that hen nights are no longer fun or in keeping with this "spirit". Instead, *Cosmopolitan* portrays hen nights as having undergone a transformation in recent years into something negative: "But when an e-mail entitled '*Itinerary*' popped into my inbox, my heart sank. For starters, it wasn't just a hen night – it was a hen weekend. Then there were the precise times allocated for *everything*. This wasn't how it was meant to be".

Further, references are made to the women who organise hen nights as "henzillas" and like with the term 'bridezilla' (a term used to refer to 'out-of-control' and 'demanding' brides-to-be), is a term which implies a woman with a foul and selfish temperament. Henzilla is a term which blends hen (women who go out on a hen night with a bride-to-be) with Godzilla (the name of a Japanese movie monster). The usage of henzilla evokes imagery of a woman (just like a monster) out of control: "Be it gobbling up your cash, time or dignity". Particularly so, in relation to money and the consumption of goods (the reference to purchasing expensive designer handbags).

There does appear to be a running theme in the data in terms of 'girl power' being evoked, only to be followed by an unhappy story or a tale of 'warning'. This seems to occur on several occasions in relation to a particular postfeminist subjectivity which McRobbie (2009) refers to as the 'phallic girl'. The 'phallic girl' is one who makes herself appear to be always sexually available and 'up for it':

### Extract 3

A year ago, I split with my boyfriend of two years, after the spark had gone out. I couldn't wait to be single. There were endless opportunities... a potential date with the gorgeous Italian guy at my gym, or hours of flirting



with the guys in skinny jeans who had moved next door. This was going to be great!

The reality wasn't as fun. I started off dating-by-numbers – statistically if I saw enough men, surely one would be a winner? I should have known it wouldn't work – my maths is awful! Two months in, being out every night was exhausting. I was tired of the fake enthusiastic banter, and I was oh-so-bored of keeping my legs and bikini line smooth, just in case. (Company, May 2011, pp. 110-111).

In this extract, at a surface level it appears that a postfeminist discourse is being drawn upon in terms of how young women should always appear to be 'up for it' ("There were endless opportunities"), in other words always sexually available to men. Here the status of being single is reconstructed as being 'back on the market' and being a state in which a woman has the potential to date men on a daily basis ("This was going to be great!"). The possibility of living as a single woman is not considered and instead it is suggested that a woman should take every opportunity to 'bag a man'. However, as was the case with extract 1: "bedding more than a handful of men didn't make you a slag" (Company), there is the suggestion that adopting a 'phallic girl' subjectivity will only bring a woman misery. This can be seen in how serial dating is constructed here as a desperate, lonely and even empty experience: "Two months in, being out every night was exhausting. I was tired of the fake enthusiastic banter, and I was oh-so-bored of keeping my legs and bikini line smooth, just in case". According to McRobbie (2009), the 'phallic girl' gives the impression that women have won equality with men through their adoption of 'male behaviours' and treats masculine hegemony as unproblematic. This could be argued to be tied in with the image of the 'ladette'. In terms of genealogy, in the 1990s, the 'ladettes' label was often used by the press to compare the behaviour of young women with young men, particularly in terms of alcohol consumption (Whelehan, 2000; Day et al., 2004). Whelehan (2000) is critical of 'girl power' and 'ladette' culture as she suggests that they are based on meeting aggression with similar aggression (in particular, sexual aggression). Whelehan argues that this can lead to a cynical view that women can only get on in society by adopting the worst excesses of 'male behaviour' and that this will not benefit women in the workplace and other arenas.

Interestingly, this 'cautionary tale' is further complicated when *Company* suggests that abstaining from serial dating (referred to as 'a man ban') is a practice women should adopt for their own wellbeing ("It was the first time my life had been all

about me, and it felt amazing!") and is construed as a way for women to take control of their dating life: "I'm seizing back control of my (non) love life". However, this notion that a 'man ban' is about women putting themselves first is problematised as the message is intertwined with the suggestion that it can also be good for helping a woman 'bag a man': "Man ban was in fact man magnet!" Again, the subject positions being made available to women here is extremely narrow and appear limited to 'token single girl': "I've always been the token single girl in our friendship group, regaling everyone with dating stories, now I have no new disasters or sexual escapades to talk about". I would suggest that this postfeminist discourse constitutes a covert exercise of power in terms of how it constrains the 'ways of being' which are made available to women by women's magazines. Indeed, the implication of the way postfeminist discourse is being drawn upon here is that a woman's life is centred around her dating a man, and when she is not with a man, she is talking about her (sexual) exploits to her friends. There is also the subtle implication here that women have nothing to talk about with each other except about men. This discourse serves the interests of those who wish to maintain the status quo of traditional gender roles, via encouraging women to maintain attention on finding a male partner and little else: "Two months in, being out every night was exhausting. [...] I was oh-so-bored of keeping my legs and bikini line smooth, just in case".

There is a running theme in the magazines of postfeminist discourse being drawn upon to present the image of the 'phallic girl' subjectivity as being both desirable for women, but also as having costs. An example of this can be seen in the extract below:

#### Extract 4

"Picture this: Virgin upper class to New York, glass of Bollinger in hand, Agent Provocateur knickers under my cashmere tracksuit, James Franco giving me the eye and beckoning me to the bathroom. Welcome to my fantasy mile-high experience. Unfortunately, that's not \*quite\* how it happened.

[...]

Looking back, I should have channelled Kate Middleton, offering Ben the chaste knee squeeze and coquettish sideways glance. Instead, I got tipsy on Pinot Grigio miniatures, made a grab for Ben's crotch and hoped the businessman behind us was asleep. We got increasingly steamy in our seats and I gave Ben the nod. He was in 'the zone' and we'd reached the

point of no return. Excited but terrified, I was about to join that most elite of clubs.  
(Company, March 2011, p. 80).

In this extract, a sexual fantasy is described in detail (specifically joining the 'mile high club' by having sex in an aeroplane). Here, the 'mile high club' is presented as being an 'elite club' which women aspire to join. This extract draws upon postfeminist discourse in suggesting that 'empowered' and 'liberated' women are active in making their sexual fantasies a reality (Valenti, 2007). Turner (2005) argues that in the early twenty-first century the ideal sexually liberated modern woman resembles "the pneumatic, take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy" (p. 1). The idea that women enjoy fulfilling sexual fantasies such as the ones found in lad's magazines (such as *Zoo*, *Nuts*, *FHM*, and *Loaded*) ties in with this postfeminist discourse and its notions around empowerment through sexual liberation, girl power, and the subject position of the 'phallic girl'.

In extract 4, a contrast is presented between fantasy (which draws upon arguably upper/middle class markers such as first class tickets, brand labels and a reference to Kate Middleton) and reality (drawing upon working class markers such as a budget airline and budget brands). Upper-class sexuality here is being construed as coy, classy and understated: "the chaste knee squeeze and coquettish sideways glance". In contrast, working-class sexuality is presented as being more forward and even aggressive: "made a grab for Ben's crotch". The implication here is that upper-class sexuality is presented as being in opposition to and privileged over working-class female sexuality and clearly sets out for the reader what a sexual fantasy is and is not. Again, there appears to be a cautionary tale here in suggesting to women that being sexually forward will only lead to misery. This is further compounded in the extract below

#### Extract 5

I don't know what I'd expected. There were no cheers or thumbs-up from fellow passengers. Not even a cheeky wink from the stag do in the first three rows. The looks I got ran the gamut from pity to disgust. Ben got them, too, but with the added extra of a silent high-five from one of the stag crew. I wanted to get off that plane – pronto. Ben was seemingly oblivious, grinning like an idiot. My fantasy had clearly worked for him. For me, not so much.

We hit the ground with a bump. The city of love was everything I'd hoped for, but sex with Ben continued to nose-dive. Needless to say, we had an

amicable break-up five minutes after hitting the tarmac at London Gatwick. Other than a trump card in 'I Have Never', I didn't gain much by putting out mid-air. But then, pants down, bent over a toilet, was never going to rate high on my list of most erotic. I hear his friends still call me Sleazyjet Girl.  
(Company, March 2011, p. 80).

It is interesting this idea of the 'mile high club' as a female fantasy as earlier, in extract 4, the 'mile high club' is referred to as an aspirational fantasy: "Excited but terrified, I was about to join that most elite of clubs", but in extract 5, imagery such as: "pants down, bent over a toilet" is invoked to paint it as a negative and not particularly desirable experience. This negative construction is emphasised in the way power is played out in this extract, via the reproduction of a sexual double-standard. The author states that she did not know what kind of reaction she had expected from her fellow passengers, but then also seems to indirectly suggest an expectation of a 'thumbs-up' or a 'cheeky wink' from at least a 'stag do' of men. This could be drawing upon the postfeminist discourse that women are expected to make their sexuality part of male entertainment implied by the hinted at expectation that 'lads on a stag do' would approve of a woman 'putting out' on an aeroplane. However, rather than the adoption of a 'phallic girl' subjectivity being empowering, it is implied to be ultimately a disempowering experience. The reaction of fellow passengers is described as more damning towards the woman than her partner: "The looks I got ran the gamut from pity to disgust. Ben got them, too, but with the added extra of a silent high-five from one of the stag crew". The implication of this is that women who take up the subject position of the 'phallic girl' run the risk of being labelled as a slut: "Sleazyjet Girl" and not being looked upon favourably by others: "The looks I got ran the gamut from pity to disgust". Further to this, the outcome of sexual behaviour (such as the 'mile high club') is suggested to have more of a negative impact on a woman than a man: "I wanted to get off that plane – pronto. Ben was seemingly oblivious, grinning like an idiot".

The negative aspects of 'girl power', are not only drawn upon in relation to sex, but also in relation to heterosexual relationships in general (particularly in terms of potential marriage):

### Extract 6

They'd talked about marriage a *lot*, but year after year, she had to take a back seat and watch friends walk down the aisle. "I don't know what else to *do*," wailed Alice. Then one married friend piped up: "You could always give him an ultimatum, that's what I did." Um, *what*? A straw poll of the GLAMOUR office shows this is pretty common. We don't talk about it because it's not exactly romantic, is it? You could ask why Alice didn't pop the question herself, but in the age of equality, isn't the proposal the last bastion of romance? Well, it is as long as it happens – and that's the part that women are taking into their hands.  
(Glamour, May 2011, p. 137).

Similar to earlier when *Company* makes reference to women taking control of their love life: "I'm seizing back control of my (non) love life", reference is made here to women 'taking control' in relation to their relationships with men. Again, traditional heterosexual relationships are being upheld as an ideal. This is what Gill (2007b) refers to as a 'heterosexualised modernisation of femininity', one that is marked out by postfeminist discourse. Sonnet (2002, as cited in Gill, 2007b) talks about the 'naughty but nice' effect, whereby the 'feminine' becomes a guilty pleasure to be consumed and is made all the more attractive by it being framed as something which is 'forbidden' by feminists. Similarly, Hollows (2003, as cited in Gill, 2007b) suggests that women being drawn towards the pleasures of traditional femininity and domesticity represent the 'return of the repressed'. Probyn (1997, as cited in Gill, 2007b) argues that pre-feminist ideals of femininity are being seductively repackaged by the media as postfeminist freedoms. Tied in with this is the way contemporary media represents modern women as valuing bodily integrity, autonomy and the freedom to make individual choices (Gill, 2007b). This repackaging of pre-feminist ideals can be seen in this extract from *Glamour*: "You could ask why Alice didn't pop the question herself, but in the age of equality, isn't the proposal the last bastion of romance?". I would suggest this bears some similarity to the constructions at work in extract 1, whereby the implication was that self-sufficient girls are unattractive to men in comparison to the more 'desirable' traditional 'girly-girl': "But why is it that the girlie girls get the fellas?" (*Company*).

This is a curious presentation of power relations being presented here by postfeminist discourse. Not only is pressuring a male partner to propose marriage being constructed as romantic here, it is also constructed by *Glamour* as being about women taking control: "is a huge message of self worth. It's about being

independent and putting your happiness first". Gill (2007b) argues that the framing of choices such as waiting for a man to propose marriage, wanting a white wedding or giving up working and taking one's husband's name upon marriage as 'empowered' could be argued to be problematic as they are located in normative notions of femininity. This is a point I have to agree with here, it is curious that women being in control and feeling empowered in their relationships is being advocated by the women's magazines, but rather than encouraging progressive solutions to problems (i.e. women proposing marriage), instead women are exhorted to desire traditional and pre-feminist notions of romance. This discourse thereby serves those who wish to see traditional, conservative gender roles being maintained, and more progressive and feminist ideals being dismissed and foreclosed.

In extract 6, women are constructed as having control in various aspects of their lives: "When it comes to their careers and social lives, women are liberated and in control, but that's never really been the case when it comes to getting engaged" (Glamour). In contrast, when it comes to getting married women are positioned as being 'at the mercy' of the men in their lives, waiting to be proposed to. It could be argued this extract encapsulates the contradictory nature of postfeminism Gill (2007b) describes. Here, women are simultaneously presented as being in control and 'empowered' (giving their boyfriend an ultimatum to propose marriage) and as being subject to traditional notions of romance (waiting for the man to propose). In this extract, it could be said that as suggested by McRobbie (2004; 2009), the spectre of feminism is summoned (both in the reference to the present being an 'age of equality' and in the query regarding whether Alice could have proposed herself), only to be dismissed as being unromantic and irrelevant in this scenario. Rather than it being suggested that the woman take control by proposing herself, she is urged to take control by making an ultimatum to her boyfriend that *he* needs to propose ("...or else"). It is an interesting mixture, arguably of feminist and pre-feminist ideas, which Gill (2007b) suggests is what postfeminism is comprised of.

To recap, before moving onto the second discourse, I identified in the magazine dataset a postfeminist discourse of 'girl power' and the 'phallic girl'. This discourse is frequently deployed through the invocation of sexual exhibitionism/availability and the 'ladette' lifestyle (such as serial dating). Though

while at times this is presented as positive: “Women were suddenly bolder, braver and boozier than ever”, there is also a ‘cautionary tale’ weaving through the discourse that such a lifestyle comes at a cost. What is implied, is that women who adopt a ‘phallic girl’ subjectivity do so at the risk of being miserable, becoming attached with slurs (e.g. “SleazyJet Girl”, Company), and even struggling to ‘bag a man’. In sum, while the magazines appear on the surface to endorse notions of ‘girl power’ and a ‘ladette’ lifestyle, they arguably still offer up the more traditional subject position of ‘woman as wife/girlfriend’ as being more desirable.

#### **5.4 “Cause I depend on me”: a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of self-improvement, individualised responsibility and self-surveillance**

A second discourse which dominates the magazine data set is the postfeminist discourse of reinvention and self-improvement. According to Baker (2010), individualisation is increasingly becoming understood as a discourse which constructs individuals as ‘entrepreneurial actors’. In this discourse, individuals must be fully responsible for their ‘life biography’ and these biographies need to be rational, self-produced, and choice-driven.

As discussed earlier, according to Gill (2007b), postfeminist discourse constitutes a sensibility in which notions of autonomy and choice are entangled with notions of self-surveillance and discipline. This discourse also appears to be founded on the principle of individualism, which has replaced the notion of individuals as being subject to pressures, constraint, influences, or any kind of social and/or political context external to themselves. As Gill points out, these notions are also central to neoliberal discourse which suggests a connection between neoliberalism and postfeminism.

A key part of this discourse is the focus on the need for the individual to ‘reinvent’, ‘improve’ and/or ‘transform’ themselves. This can be seen in the extract below.

### Extract 7

The plane touches down on the rain-soaked runway with a bump. Your purse is empty, your skin sun-kissed and your camera stuffed with travel snaps. Then Dad picks you up from the airport. Mum is cooking a roast when you get home and your bedroom is exactly how you left it. Nothing has changed. Nothing apart from you, that is. Waving goodbye to your friends, family and job to go travelling can be a wrench. But what few of us are ever prepared for is the coming home again part.

My friend Rebecca, 21, a student at Leeds Metropolitan University, travelled to Thailand and Australia last summer between her second and third year. "It was out of character for me to just go off travelling alone," Rebecca says. "Not seeing my parents and friends for two months was scary but I was determined to have the experience of a lifetime. And I did. When you're put in situations with people you've only just met; hiking, partying, exploring, taking long bus trips, the life skills you learn are invaluable. I was looking forward to bringing those experiences home." (Company, April 2011, pp. 104-105).

In extract 7, an image is painted of a gap year traveller who is changed physically (implied through 'sun-kissed' skin), financially (an empty purse) and experientially (a full memory card containing digital photographs). This transformed traveller is contrasted with her old home: "Nothing has changed. Nothing apart from you, that is". This transformation is framed as being problematic as a result of this disparity between the student's 'old-' and 'new-lives' which are positioned as now being incompatible with each other.

In this extract, travelling for a gap year is presented as being difficult and 'scary', especially if the student has never previously travelled alone but also as something worth doing regardless of these potential difficulties. Here, fear is presented as something to be overcome in order to achieve the 'experience of a lifetime' that will enable transformation of the self, career and lifestyle. The reference to gap years as the 'experience of a lifetime' constructs the experience as very rare and therefore 'special', with the implication being that it is an opportunity 'not to be missed'. It is pertinent here that this 'once in a lifetime' transformative experience is probably only available to a privileged few. A glance at advice websites such as Prospects (2012) and gapyear.com (2012) demonstrate what a very expensive experience this is. Moore (2012) has also discussed how a post-2008 recession in the UK has spurred a media backlash against gap years through the portrayal of them as solely and exclusively a pursuit for the wealthy and privileged. As gap years are only available to a



privileged few, power relations can be seen to be played out in how this discourse of self-improvement is drawn upon with a particular reader in mind: middle-class women with disposable money. The implication of this is that these magazines are excluding women who are unable to afford travelling to and staying in other countries for extended periods of time. In turn, this means that this 'experience of a lifetime' is not available for everyone and neither are the positive benefits gained from travelling available for all (such as working-class women). The implication here is that working-class women who are exposed to this discourse may feel disempowered due to them not having the resources to access this 'experience of a lifetime', and in turn not gaining the benefits and soft skills which are being touted as beneficial in terms of career prospects. This discourse of transformation and self-improvements also serves the interests of those promoting and making money from gap year programs being marketed to university students.

Also, in extract 7, there is a suggestion that this 'transformation' requires evidencing through public self-promotion such as taking photographs of activities undertaken while on a gap year and publishing them on social media sites. This idea of self-promotion in public spaces ties in with individualist discourse around 'improvement' which advocates individuals treat themselves as 'walking CVs' and adopt the subjectivity of the 'portfolio person'. A 'portfolio person', according to Gee (2000, as cited in Baker, 2010) is the idea of someone who is ever-transformative, and continually building up a portfolio of rearrangeable skills. The 'portfolio person' is a subject who pursues a kind of self-actualisation through constructing a self-reflexive biography, the implication of which, is that it provides individuals with an illusory sense of autonomy and can lead to extensive self-surveillance (Baker, 2010).

The extract below discusses how the 'old-' and 'new-lives' can clash with each other after a woman has undergone 'transformation'.

#### Extract 8

The problem with regaling friends with your experiences is that it's difficult for them to imagine "like how stunning the stars looked over Africa, yah" when they've been sitting in a strip-lighting office at a computer screen. And no-one wants to be a gap year bore, starting each sentence with, "There was this one time, in Australia..."

This is something Rebecca felt conscious of. So much so that she found it easier to share her stories with fellow globetrotters on forums than with the mates she'd known since school. Personally, I found her stories enthralling but Rebecca says she always wishes she could talk about her travels to more like-minded people.  
(Company, April 2011, p. 105).

In addition, women who go on gap years are presented as being changed by their experiences to the extent that they can no longer relate to 'those who don't'. So here, travelling on a gap year is represented as being an experience which creates a social and emotional separation between Rebecca's 'old-' and 'new-life'. Even when the author expresses an enthusiasm for her friend Rebecca's travel stories, Rebecca is shown to be more interested in seeking out 'more like-minded people', as opposed to those who 'stay behind'. Here, gap year travelling is privileged over choosing not to travel and taking up employment "sitting in a strip-lighting office at a computer screen". Together, extracts 7 and 8 construct Rebecca as going through a social transformation or 'reinvention'. It could be argued that this 'reinvention' is represented as a 'metamorphosis story' of a 'caterpillar transforming into a butterfly'. In such a 'metamorphosis', change cannot be undone, there can be no going back, such a possibility is not made available in extracts 7 and 8.

It is also suggested by the author that a woman's friends will not be particularly interested in hearing her stories about experiences in foreign countries such as Africa. Interestingly, in this extract, the author, when discussing how friends back in the UK might perceive their gap year travelling friend, she says "like how stunning the stars looked over Africa, yah" (p. 105), which could be referring to the internet comedy sketch series 'Gap Yah' created by Matt Lacey in 2010 (Tipp & Sherifi, 2012). These sketches draw upon stereotypes of British public school students who boast about their gap year travels. In these sketches and the author's reference to them, class and privilege are derided. Both this reference and the suggestion that no one wants to be a 'gap year bore' serves to distance the traveller from their 'old friends'.

#### Extract 9

The biggest challenge of post-gap-year life is the prospect of stepping back on the nine-to-five treadmill and, gulp, re-entering the world of work. Careers coach Selina Barker and author of *The Careershifters Guide* e-book (£25, careershifters.org) says that when it comes to finding a job,

travel experience can only be a good thing: "Travelling is widely accepted these days by employers as a valuable experience. Demonstrate the lessons you learnt and the knowledge and skills you acquired in a way that proves how well it equips you for the job you're going for."

If you're feeling really goalless when you get back home, it's also worth knowing you should use your travelling experiences to your advantage: you might have caught the travel bug and want to book another flight as soon as you get home; you might feel more confident and prepared to apply to your dream job; you might have a fresh, new perspective on everything, and you probably made some friends for life. Either way, there's an aim and something to feel excited about. So when you hop off that plane ready to pick up where you left off, make sure you remember that this is the first day of the rest of your life, and the world is still your oyster. Or falafel, or pad Thai, or enchilada...  
(Company, April 2011, p. 105).

In extract 9, the return from travelling to a normal daily working life, described as 'the nine-to-five treadmill' is made to look like a daunting prospect. Similarly, in extract 8, such work is cast in an undesirable light, as a place where women sit in 'a strip-lighting office at a computer screen' all day. This is a construction of the traveller's 'old-life', which is being derided here to the extent that it becomes difficult to understand why anyone would want to inhabit it. No middle ground is made available in these extracts, women are either positioned as being 'stuck' and/or 'stagnating' in a 'dead-end job' or they are positioned as 'high-flyers' and 'go-getters' with a 'fresh, new perspective' on everything. Again, the dimension of power can be seen to be operating through this 'classed' discourse, as the ability to be mobile is valued and privileged. This could be more difficult for women from a working-class background due to the costs involved in mobility, travel and going on gap years (Prospects, 2012). In turn, this renders the subject position of 'go-getter' and 'high-flyer' inaccessible for women who lack the resources to go travelling abroad on a gap year.

However, to complicate this representation, the return to the world of work is not completely dismissed either in extract 9. Rather, it is constructed as a challenge for the traveller to face on the return from their gap year and making use of travelling experience is advocated. Here, a suggestion is made that a gap year traveller might want to do some more travelling or apply for their 'dream job'. In this context, travel experience is presented as being a good thing and as something that will place the traveller in good stead in the job market. In this extract, careers coach Selina Barker argues that travel experience can only be a

good thing when it comes to job hunting. Any other possibility is not represented here. 'Success' is constructed in a very particular way in extract 9, in the form of a new career (the 'dream job'), new friends and a 'new-life'. This article draws upon a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of self-improvement which is the taken for granted assumption that everyone has a 'dream job' which will provide the individual with status and a high-paying salary. This discourse proposes that an individual *needs* to change in order to achieve 'success'. As part of this change or 'improvement', the individual is encouraged not to become a better person, but a better worker: "New You, New Job" (Company). This was conceptualised by Gordon (1987, as cited in Baker, 2010) as the individual becoming an 'entrepreneur of the self' who is autonomous and perpetually responsive.

As stated earlier, in extract 9, advice is given by a careers coach who advocates taking gap year travel and argues that such experience is valued by employers. As part of this extract, the careers coach is promoting a book she has written and a careers website she has contributed towards. By constructing gap year travel as a purely positive and even useful thing for people to do, this discourse serves the interests of career coaches and career websites, as potential travellers will need advice on how to achieve their goals. As discussed earlier, according to 'self-improvement' discourses, people need to adopt a 'portfolio persons' subjectivity (Gee, 2000, as cited in Baker, 2010) and as part of this, individuals need to know how to demonstrate how what they have learned and achieved equips them for their 'dream job'. For example, in extract 9, readers are told they need to be able to articulate how their experience maps onto an employer's requirements for a specific job. To reiterate, this discourse exhorts the individual not to become a better person, but to become a better worker. This means this discourse also serves the interests of employers, the labour market and capitalism as it encourages individuals to always be 'improving' themselves (such as through developing their skills and knowledge), and therefore becoming more productive and effective in their job roles.

Strangely, in extract 9, there is no mention made of the possibility of a woman returning to her studies after a gap year or the possibility of being unemployed, rather, the focus here is on entering/re-entering the workforce. This again, could be argued to be benefiting the labour market by encouraging gap year travellers

to focus on 'improving' themselves and making themselves employable (McRobbie, 2009). The emphasis throughout is placed on doing gap years to 'improve', and improve for careers, not for anything else such as helping others through voluntary work. The goal being constructed here is that of achieving the 'dream job' and avoiding low-paid work (McRobbie, 2009).

There is also an age slant presented in the extract, as the last paragraph hints at gap year travel as being something young women do, not older women. The author tells the reader that when they return home, it is the first day of the rest of their life, and that the world is still 'their oyster', thus giving an impression that gap year travel is a young woman's 'game' which will 'open up doors' for her.

As discussed earlier, this discourse encourages women to be responsible for their own 'life-plan' and treat themselves as 'walking CVs', adopting a 'portfolio person' subjectivity (Gee, 2000, as cited in Baker, 2010). Women are expected to always be planning and developing their careers in order to be 'successful' (McRobbie, 2009). This can be seen in the extract below.

#### Extract 10

Siobhan Hamilton-Phillips, senior consultant psychologist at Career Psychology Ltd, says, 'No one except you will look after your career, and joining a network will help you make progress. These days you are highly likely to find one that suits you. Aim for a meeting of minds, a good social calender [sic] and the opportunity to network with women from various business sectors. And, when you've got to know other members, a place to relax and have fun.' Over to you...  
(Marie Claire, May 2011, p. 120).

In this extract, women are told it is their sole responsibility to look after their career as no one else will do it for them. It is suggested here that the way to make career progress is by joining a network. Here, a postfeminist discourse as constituted by notions of individualised responsibility is being drawn upon: "Over to you...". A successful woman is constructed here as an active and autonomous agent who plans and develop their career, this can also be seen in the extract below.

#### Extract 11

LET NO ONE STAND IN YOUR WAY

“When I went to the bank for a business loan, I was just 22 and they asked what capital I had to secure it. I had a horse and an old Citroën Saxo! They told me I was too young and should think again about starting my own business in 10 years or so. But I was determined. I went to an accountant who helped me out for free, as he knew I’d be using him once I had the shop. My parents also kindly lent me some cash, which is probably what helped me secure my loan.”  
(Cosmopolitan, March 2011, p. 206).

In this extract, successful women are shown to be women who are determined and active in trying to achieve their goals. Here, women are told that in order to be successful they need to be able to overcome any obstacles thrown in their path. As with extract 10 (“No one except you will look after your career”), it is implied that it is up to individual women to make their own successes in life. Again, the dimension of power can be seen to be permeating this (arguably) ‘classed’ discourse, as the examples provided in extract 11 involves the individual being helped financially by their parents and the writer herself owning a car and a horse. This would suggest the magazine is speaking to middle-class readers, as these kinds of financial support could be inaccessible to those from low-income backgrounds and the extract does not make any other suggestions for those who may not be so fortunate in having such financial support to fall back on. Further, despite examples of financial support being referred to here, a successful career is still being strongly linked to the ability of an individual woman to navigate her way through life and self-manage her life course.

Also running across the dataset is a discourse of personal responsibility and self-surveillance. This centres on the message that women should take responsibility for various aspects of their life (e.g. career, relationships, family), as well as self-monitor and regulate themselves (particularly their bodies):

#### Extract 12

So, given how many of us fall prey to label envy, who can blame stores for pandering to our vanity? “It’s tempting to point the finger at the retailers but it’s time we took responsibility for our own self-esteem and health,” says Kate Cook. “If you want to wear small sizes to show off, then go for it. But a more useful thing would be to stop judging ourselves by the label in our jeans, and start *measuring* ourselves instead. I tell my patients to measure their waist-to-hip ratio [...] every few months to see if they’re being delusional about their size.”

It seems that while vanity sizing is a great ego boost – until you try to buy vintage and find you can’t get your normal size over your head – it means

that you shouldn't use your dress size as a guide to your health. A tape measure is the only real way to make sure you're the right size for your age and height.  
(Cosmopolitan, May 2011, p. 134).

In this extract, women are urged to take responsibility for their self-esteem and health and through this their body size and weight. Here, a discourse of personal responsibility and self-surveillance is being deployed by *Cosmopolitan* (Gill, 2007b). The dimension of power can clearly be seen to run through the way this discourse is deployed. The concept of an individual being subject to external political and cultural influences is entirely absent and instead everyday life is seen through the lens of personal choice and self-determination. Gill (2007b) argues that examples of this can be seen in the increasing number of women and teenage girls having breast augmentation surgery and Brazilian waxes. These beauty practices are often presented as indicators of women 'pleasing themselves' and making themselves feel good by 'using beauty'. However, Gill argues that little to no attention is paid to external pressures that women may be experiencing to take up these practices. In this discourse, taking up beauty practices such as body hair depilation, putting on make-up, wearing lingerie and high heel shoes are framed as the woman doing these things 'for herself' and not 'for men' and therefore positioned as 'okay' and even 'liberating' (Gill, 2007b). This also disempowers feminists. If a feminist raises any objection to a particular beauty practice, their argument is dismissed and not taken seriously as this discourse presents a woman's participation in beauty practices as her own choice and as something she is doing 'for herself' and this is implied to be therefore acceptable. An interesting question raised by Gill (2007b) is that if women are entirely free agents who are following their own desires, then why does the resulting valued 'look' appear so similar (i.e. slim waist, no cellulite, depilated body)?

This reconstruction of beauty practices as being to 'please the self' is strongly entwined with what is known as 'body work' which forms a part of the postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007b; Gill and Scharff, 2011). According to Gill (2007b), today's media is heavily preoccupied with the female body, in particular the idea of the 'sexy body'. Here, the body is presented as being a woman's source of power and her key source of identity, but also as being 'unruly' and in need of being 'worked on' through constant discipline, monitoring and surveillance. Within this

discourse, a woman's ability to conform to the increasingly narrow criteria of female attractiveness and beauty is constructed as being dependent on their willingness to invest in this goal via consumer spending. It has been argued by Valenti (2007) that consumerism is at the heart of beauty standards because the beauty and self-help industries are dependent on women feeling inadequate so they will spend money on products such as face creams, manicures, make-up, waxing, tanning, diet pills, self-help books and plastic surgery. It serves the interests of beauty and self-help industries to exhort women to engage in body work and self-monitoring of the body. It also serves the interests of women's magazines, as they receive money via advertising beauty products and writing advertorials which promote certain beauty practices to women as being not only a desirable but also an essential part of their beauty and self-care regime. In the media women's bodies are scrutinised, dissected, evaluated and judged to always be at the risk of 'failing' by both male and female journalists, television presenters, paparazzi and fashion gurus (Gill, 2007b). Gill (2007b) argues that this regulation of women's bodies is excessive and punitive to the extent that conventionally attractive women such as A-list celebrities can be picked apart for being 'too fat' or 'too thin', thus suggesting that they always have the potential to fail. To prevent this, women are urged to constantly monitor their appearance, particularly body size and weight. Here, women are told if they are happy wearing small sizes then they should go ahead and do it. However, the extract also suggests women doing just this are delusional and unhealthy. Health in this extract is constructed simply in terms of body size and shape.

Also in extract 12, a postfeminist discourse of individualised responsibility and self-surveillance is being drawn upon to place the onus of responsibility squarely on women to monitor their body size constantly (and carrying around a tape measure with them to do so). In contrast, the clothes industry is absolved of all responsibility and consequence for using misleading size labels on their clothes. This corresponds with Gill's (2007b) argument that body shape and size have been turned into 'problems' which require ongoing labour and surveillance by women. With more and more areas of the body coming under surveillance, Gill (2007b) suggests that women will stop being comfortable with their bodies as this discourse around 'body work' implies that no body part is 'good enough', as can be seen in the extract below. Though I would also argue that Gill is implying here



that women have at some point been comfortable with their bodies, when this may not have been the case.

#### Extract 13

“A 31in waist is a 31in waist,” says psychologist Joan Harvey of Newcastle University. “There’s no such thing as a standard size, and it’s self-delusion to think you’re ‘thin’ or ‘healthy’ just because you’ve squeezed yourself into a smaller dress size. We make statements through our clothes, and many girls would rather be a Topshop size 10 than a River Island size 12, for example. But when shopping for a ‘best size’ becomes more important than a ‘best look,’ then it’s a silly deception.” (Cosmopolitan, May 2011, p. 134).

In this extract, we are given two contrasting messages. One is telling women they should not focus on finding a ‘best size’ when clothes shopping but a ‘best look’, which at first glance appears to draw on elements of this discourse’s message of ‘empowerment’, ‘choice’ and ‘doing it for yourself’, but at the same time it is encouraging women to fixate on their body size and continually monitor this. Gill (2007b) suggests that this links in with a ‘makeover paradigm’ which has come to dominate the media and requires people to believe they are flawed or lacking in some way. Valenti (2007) discusses how makeover television shows use a rhetoric of ‘brokenness’, in which women are not only trying to adhere to a set beauty standard but also trying to fix something which is ‘wrong’ with them. In sum, this discourse constitutes a covert exercise of power by making requirements on women to devote both time and money on a daily basis towards maintaining body work, thereby redirecting women’s attention and energy away from other aspects of their life (such as work or recreation). Women also lose out due to the high costs of engaging in body work (e.g. beauty products, dilapidation, visiting hairdressers, spas, cosmetic surgery, and so on). This can in particular impact on women who do not have the resources for engaging in some modes of body work as upper- and middle-class women do (e.g. hiring a personal trainer and/or dietician, paying for cosmetic surgery) or are time-poor due to working long hours in low-paid work and/or caring responsibilities.

According to Gill (2007b), the media’s intense focus on women’s bodies is linked to the increasing prevalence of sexual discourses in contemporary culture. McNair (2002, as cited in Gill, 2007b) refers to this increasing sexualisation as being part of a ‘striptease culture’. Women’s and teenage girls’ magazines construct sex as something which requires constant attention, self-policing and

discipline. Gill (2007b) argues that women are placed in the subject position of monitors or 'gatekeepers' in relationships, who are then tasked with the responsibility to not only ensure they defend their sexual reputation and are protected against sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy; but also to ensure they produce themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects who are able to look after men's sexual needs and self-esteem. Some of these aspects can be seen in earlier extracts, such as in extract 3 in which the author expressed frustration with having to maintain her body for potential dates (e.g. shaving her body) every day, as well as having to maintain conversational interest in the men she is dating.

Similarly, to extract 13, the extract below projects the message that health and appearance are interconnected and that women should modify and discipline their health more in order to improve their appearance such as through quitting smoking.

#### Extract 14

"Smoking and sun damage are the two biggest risk factors when it comes to premature skin ageing," says consultant dermatologist Dr Nick Lowe of London's Cranley Clinic. And if you think you don't need to worry about that yet, think again. "If you smoke now, you'll look 10 to 15 years older when you reach your forties and fifties," says Dr Lowe. "And I can guarantee your skin today looks dull, grey and unhealthy. This is because smoking decreases blood supply to your skin, so it's not getting the oxygen and nutrients it needs. Longer term, smoking damages the same enzymes in skin that the sun does, breaking down levels of collagen and elastin that keeps it supple. It creates discolouration, age spots and wrinkles, particularly around the eyes and mouth."

Quitting smoking really is the fastest beauty fix. "Within two to three months, you can expect skin to look brighter," promises Dr Lowe. (Glamour, March 2011, p. 265).

In this extract, the dominant message is that women need to avoid premature skin ageing and one of the ways they can do this is by quitting smoking. Quitting smoking is presented as being a quick 'beauty fix' essential to improve the brightness, colour and suppleness of the skin. Here, looking young is presented as being desirable and valued while marks of ageing such as wrinkles and age spots are to be avoided at all costs. It could be argued that an element of ageism is underlying the message found in this extract. Here, to look older is undesirable for women and that improving attractiveness is the ultimate goal of health

practices such as quitting smoking, rather than for other benefits such as avoiding lung cancer. As pointed out by Valenti (2007), there is a message running through Western society that if women are not always trying to 'improve' themselves, in particular their appearance, then they are considered as not 'taking care of' themselves and unattractive.

Sometimes in the magazines analysed, women are encouraged to adopt health practices such as exercise not just for the sake of appearance but also to improve their emotional wellbeing, as can be seen in the extract below.

#### Extract 15

"I wish I'd known all the mood-boosts I'd been missing out on by *not* exercising. It was only in 2003 when Matt Roberts invited me in for one session that I found a place that worked for me. Every time I go, it's absolutely horrendous but I always – always – feel great after I've been to the gym. There are a lot of things I'll sacrifice before I stop paying for that gym membership!"  
(Glamour, April 2011, p. 168).

In this extract, women are told of the benefits of exercise and are encouraged to exercise in order to be rewarded with 'mood-boosts'. Exercising in a gym is described as being 'horrendous' but beneficial suggesting that women should do it regardless of how difficult or unpleasant it may be. This fits with Gill's (2007b) explanation of how 'body work' must always be understood in terms of being 'self-indulgence'. However, power as a dimension can be seen here as not only are women exhorted to 'self-indulge', there is also the connotation that women are required to make 'sacrifices' in their lives: "There are a lot of things I'll sacrifice before I stop paying for that gym membership!". It is suggested that in order to "feel great" and achieve emotional wellbeing, women need to make sacrifices in their lives and channel everything towards disciplining their bodies, even if the experience is "absolutely horrendous". Here, then power constrains the 'ways of being' which are made available to women, through the implication that a woman is required to engage in practices to 'better themselves' even if it is a practice they do not like or want to do (such as signing up for membership with a gym and exercising there).

It could also be argued that power is also played out in this extract in relation to just how 'classed' this discourse is as it is suggesting that in order to achieve

wellbeing women must pay for and join a gym. Joining a gym is an expensive commitment which can be out of reach for women from lower-income brackets. The postfeminist discourse of individualised responsibility and self-surveillance could be argued to be highly 'classed', 'gendered' and 'racialised' as frequently it is white working-class women who are targeted by make-over television shows and urged to emulate white middle-class women (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007b). While make-over and reality television shows appear to target working-class women, I would argue that it is middle-class women who are being targeted by the 'body work' messages in the magazine data. The practices which are being promoted in the magazines are less accessible to working-class women in the sense of gym memberships and exercise equipment being expensive and so it is subsequently more difficult for working-class women to engage in 'body work'.

Not only are women urged to police and discipline their bodies by the magazines in this study, but they are also encouraged to monitor and regulate their emotional wellbeing. As Gill (2007b) points out, in today's media culture, the female body is constructed as a window looking into the individual's interior life. In this discourse, a sleek, toned, controlled figure is presented as not only desirable, but also essential for success. Gill also highlights how the media has been known to praise women for using their body as a canvas to create an image of self-confidence which hides how hurt or vulnerable they may feel inside. This creation of the body as canvas can be seen in the extract below.

#### Extract 16

##### The happy face

"There have probably been a hundred studies that have shown that if you simply put a smile on your face, even when you're sad, you can actually produce a happy feeling," says James Laird, author of *Feelings: The Perception of Self*.

##### The happy back

Good posture actually elevates your spirits, says Laird. Instead of slumping, roll your shoulders back and down, stand up straight and lift your chin up: positive feelings will follow.

##### The happy foot

"If your feet are sore, you'll be grumpy," says orthopaedic surgeon Keith Wapner. He prescribes a good foot-rub at the end of the day (research shows it boosts mood) and stretching the back of your ankles, which get overly tight from switching between heels and flats. (Glamour, April 2011, p. 166).

In this extract, women are encouraged to work on their body in order to bring about positive feelings, whether it is through smiling, good posture or a foot-rub. Again, this is another example of this postfeminist discourse which persuades women they are lacking in some way and need to work on their self-care with the assistance of self-help and lifestyle experts (Gill, 2007b). According to Valenti (2007), life-coaches on makeover television shows make the assertion that 'being beautiful' will cure all of a woman's problems. As discussed earlier, power plays out through this discourse by inciting women to use their body as a canvas to hide their inner feelings (Gill, 2007b) rather than tackling those feelings and/or their root cause. This is demonstrated in this extract as it tells women that even if they are feeling sad they can make the feeling go away by simply putting a smile on their face and straightening their back. There is no suggestion of addressing the reasons for a woman's feelings, such as psychological, structural and economic causes, instead it is reduced to the level of the individual and the personal. Rather than being about making women feel better, the function of this discourse appears to be to urge women to *hide* any negative feelings. I would argue that this then serves those who wish to reinstate traditional gender norms (such as women being compliant and docile). This discourse represents a covert exercise of power by drawing women's attention away from root causes of unhappiness, and towards superficial (surface-level) solutions to their problems, as opposed to campaigning and advocating change at a structural, political and economical level. This pattern can also be seen in the next extract.

#### Extract 17

##### Create your future

"Visualise yourself in ten years' time," says Gael Lindenfield, author of *101 Morale Boosters*. "What do you want your life to be like? Use all your senses to create a mind movie that includes every possibility. Where will you be living, who with, what will you do with your free time, your work time? When you have a clear picture, make it concrete by drawing it, or making a collage from magazine pictures that represent your goals."

##### Do sweat the small stuff

Not all goals have to be big. "Try setting absurdly small ones, to achieve changes so tiny they make you laugh," offers Burkeman. "So instead of vowing to get fit or run a marathon, tell yourself you'll run *one* minute a day. If it makes you laugh, it won't make you scared."  
(Glamour, April 2011, p. 149).

The first part of this extract advocates women to look towards their future. They are advised by a self-help author called Lindenfield, to visualise where they see

themselves in ten years' time, focusing on long-term goals for various facets of their life such as work, leisure and relationships. This emphasis on long-term goals could be argued to conflict with the advice given by Burkeman in the second part of this extract. Here, Burkeman advises women to make small goals rather than big ones. He argues that goals do not need to be big and can be focused on making minor changes. He also suggests that if a goal is so small it may make a woman laugh, and if she finds a goal funny she will not be scared. This comment by Burkeman could be argued to be layered with assumptions about how women create and negotiate goals. This part of the extract gives the impression that women find larger goals 'scary' and daunting, and therefore are less likely to achieve them. Through this, women are being characterised as being unable to negotiate large goals, and as needing help and support.

The implication of this discourse is that all an individual needs in order to be happy and 'successful' is to visualise a 'happy future' and then 'make it so' through willpower and creating a collage. By constructing 'happiness' and 'success' as something that can be achieved simply through willpower and visualisation, this puts the onus of achieving a 'happy' and 'successful' future entirely onto the individual. In this construction, no acknowledgement is made of the material reality of people's lives. For example, there is no recognition that the opportunities available to people are constrained by their access to education and financial resources as well as intersectional factors such as gender, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation. This demonstrates a play in power relations, in particular the focus on 'equality of opportunity' rather than 'equality' which is what McNay (1992, as cited in Gill, 2007b) refers to as 'reprivatisation' of issues such as racism, homophobia and domestic violence which became politicised only relatively recently. The implication of this is that an individual needs to be self-reliant and responsible for their progress towards 'success' regardless of any disadvantages they may face (Baker, 2010). This postfeminist discourse as informed by individualist notions constructs women as free and autonomous agents who are no longer constrained by inequality and capable of managing their own life-course. This incitement to the individual to self-manage their life-course can also be seen in extract 18 below.

### Extract 18

For centuries, the idea of happiness has fascinated researchers, from ancient philosophers to modern scientists trying to find out what works and why. The fact that sales of self-help books have increased by 40% in the past five years shows that the quest for emotional wellbeing is more important to us than ever. But does it need to be a lifetime's project, or is true contentment within easier reach?

"Most of the time when we're happy, we don't even think about it – we're chatting with friends, listening to music, relaxing in the bath," says Oliver Burkeman, author of *Help! How To Become Slightly Happier And Get A Bit More Done*. "It's this attainable stuff that counts, not some higher state of bliss."

We've gathered all the latest research and expert advice to fill your next ten years with happiness.  
(Glamour, April 2011, p. 148).

In extract 18, the author discusses how happiness and emotional wellbeing is something that is increasingly desirable and a source of fascination for researchers. As with previous extracts, 'expert knowledge' is drawn upon to lend legitimacy to the discourse being drawn upon. Happiness is constructed as something which can be gained through 'self-help'. Self-help is tied in with what Nikolas Rose (1999) calls the 'psy complex'. The psy complex describes professions such as psychiatry and counselling which intervene in people's lives by drawing upon psychological theory and methods. This takes place across a wide range of domains including the family, the workplace, intimate and social relationships and even people's eating and consumer habits (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers (2001) argues that in the English-speaking world, women are heavily targeted with 'self-help' advice and that an onus is placed on women by self-help books to 'improve' themselves. The implication of this postfeminist discourse is that women must take personal responsibility for their actions and to avoid vulnerability, which, according to Gill (2007b), is tied in with postfeminist sensibilities which resist the view that there are social, cultural and political forces constraining the individual and instead emphasise personal choice and self-determination. Power is at play here, in the way this discourse then disempowers feminists who try to draw attention to and challenge structural constraints in society. As Bauman (2002a, 2002b) observes, responsibility is now placed with individuals and not government – if a person fails to succeed, they are the ones blamed for their lack of success.

In the extract, happiness is constructed as being binary in form, with self-actualisation or a 'higher state of bliss' placed at one end and smaller 'attainable stuff' at the other. The author of this extract suggests that an individual could pursue happiness their entire life and still not achieve it. Instead, they propose that if women want to achieve 'true contentment' there are easier ways of going about it. Here, emphasis is being placed on the importance of small attainable happiness for women to achieve, while self-actualisation is being downplayed or even dismissed. Through this, activities such as 'pampering' and 'treating yourself' are privileged. This appears to draw upon an 'anti-intellectual' discourse which dismisses 'deep thought' and philosophy as being the pursuit of 'thinkers', while the 'doers' are privileged as those who 'get on with life'. It could also be argued that this representation of smaller 'attainable stuff' as desirable constitutes a covert exercise of power. The implication here is that it is the 'small stuff' which is what women should be pursuing, and deflects women's attention away from pursuing happiness on a deeper level (i.e. self-actualisation). This to me has echoes of de Beauvoir's (1949) use of the concepts of 'immanence' and 'transcendence' when discussing power relations between men and women. Immanence refers to repeated activities, the mundane, and stagnation; while transcendence refers to freedoms being opened up and a reaching towards the future via meaningful projects. According to de Beauvoir, men embody transcendence and are therefore able to open their futures via a profession, while women are relegated to care-giving and therefore immanence. To de Beauvoir, women's horizons are blocked by immanence. I propose this is the case here in the way 'deep thought', philosophy, and self-actualisation are dismissed, while more (relatively) banal pleasures such as bubble baths are encouraged and praised.

What's also suggested in the extract is that women are already happy doing everyday things such as socialising with friends and pampering themselves (e.g. having a bath) but that they are not aware they are happy while doing these things. This suggestion is made by a male self-help author (called Oliver Burkeman) who is quoted by the author of the article in *Glamour*. Happiness for women has been constructed here in a very gendered way with gender stereotypes being drawn upon such as the idea that 'all' women want to be 'pampered' and that central to women's emotional wellbeing is communication and building/maintaining social relationships. Gill (2007b) talks at length about



how postfeminist discourse emphasises self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline, in particular with regards to the regulation of women's bodies and appearance (which she refers to as 'body work'). This discourse urges women to maintain discipline over their bodies and this, according to Gill (2007b), has been changed through an "ideological sleight of hand" (p. 155) into 'fun', 'pampering' and 'self-indulgence'. She also points out that it is not only women's bodies which require monitoring in this discourse, but also the 'self'. Gill argues that Western culture has become saturated by individualistic 'self-help' discourses resulting in the 'self' becoming a 'project' which needs to be monitored, disciplined and 'improved'.

The last part of the extract, tells the reader that the author has drawn upon advice from various experts and research to help them achieve ten years of happiness. Similarly, the title of the article is 'Make the next 10 years your happiest yet'. This implies that not only do women need help from external sources in order to achieve happiness, but that however happy they may have been in the past, they could be happier still. The impression left by this is that women should be striving for ever greater happiness. The yearning for ever greater happiness contradicts the message given by self-help author Burkeman in the earlier part of the extract, as he stated that women achieve happiness all the time in their day-to-day lives and that it is this type of happiness which counts.

To summarise, a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualised notions of self-improvement, individual responsibility and self-surveillance is operating throughout the magazine dataset. This discourse is deployed in the magazines to exhort women to work on themselves through self-improvement (such as through travelling, networking) and 'body work' (such as self-monitoring their body size/shape, exercising). Women are encouraged to work on their body in order to appear slim and beautiful (rather than for health reasons such as building up body strength or cutting their risk of disease). Emphasis is placed on individual responsibility in regards to health, careers and happiness.

## 5.5 “All you need is love”: a traditionalist discourse of ‘necessary heterosexuality’, ‘reproductive destiny’ and romance

Also running across the data set is the discourse of ‘necessary heterosexuality’, ‘reproductive destiny’ and romance. In this discourse, heterosexual relationships are privileged over any other forms of relationships and a romantic narrative is drawn upon as part of this. A key area of this discourse focuses on the ‘need’ for relationships to progress in a traditional and linear fashion (i.e. starting a relationship; moving in together; getting engaged and married; and having children). In particular, the subject of whether or not women should take the decision to have babies is a focal point of discussion in several articles. For example, one author talks about their struggle to make a decision whether or not to have a baby (Red, April 2011), while another article (Glamour, March 2011) provides a checklist of questions for readers to consult to help them work out when they are ready to have a baby. There is an implicit assumption here that the reader *will* have a baby at some point in their life, it is just a matter of working out when they are ready. There are five questions in the checklist. One example is “Have we discussed the best way to parent?” (Glamour, March 2011, p. 132). If the reader answers ‘no’ to three or more of the five questions then, according to the author, the reader may not really be ready to have children. The purpose of this article is to advise readers on making transitions over the course of their adult life, including starting a relationship; moving in to a home with their partner; getting married; and having children. An example of this can be seen in the following extract which follows directly on from the checklist of questions. Extract 19 is structured by the author in the form of a list of ‘tips’ and offers readers advice on making the decision whether or not to have children.

### Extract 19

#### **Stop sliding, take control**

**Make your own choice** “You need to know that having a baby is what you want; that it’s your choice and there’s no pressure from your partner, or society,” says Dr Samuel. “Not having a baby is an equally valid choice”.

**Get support** Before you reach any decision make sure you know what you’re letting yourself in for. Do you have a good support network? Your partner, your mum, your friends – whatever. “Remember there is no going back once you’ve had a child”, says Northam. “It’s a lifetime commitment.”

**Think about your own experiences** “What would you replicate or change?” says Northam. “Focusing on the specifics can help you come to

a decision. So, instead of thinking, 'Do I want a baby?', think about the type of parent you'd like to be."

**Try to stay calm** "Go easy on yourself and trust your instincts," says Dr Samuel.

(Glamour, March 2011, p. 132).

The first 'tip' in this extract reassures women that choosing not to have children is also a valid choice. However, this reassurance could be said not to be backed up by the rest of the data as nowhere else is being childfree presented as a possible life-path for women. The third tip in extract 19, advises women to reflect on their own experiences of being a child and how their parents brought them up. It then goes on to encourage women to reframe the question in their minds from being whether they want to have a baby or not, to what kind of parent they want to be. By changing the focus of the question from whether a woman wants a baby towards deciding what kind of parent they want to be, power is being exercised covertly here. This is because the possibility of choosing *not* to have children is no longer made available to women reading the article, thereby constraining the ways of being for women. In one simple switch of emphasis, the possibility of remaining childless is erased and childfree women are 'written out' of the rest of the article. The only position being made available for young women to occupy is motherhood and the only room for choice is over what kind of mother to be.

While the notion of 'choice' is peppered throughout the articles, only one possible decision is ever discussed: the decision to have a baby. Throughout the data, reproduction is discussed as a foregone conclusion and it is assumed that all women want to have children and will choose to have them eventually. Despite this rhetoric of choice, the position of choosing not to have children is largely rendered invisible in the data. The first tip in extract 19 also emphasises the importance of women making their own choice and how they should not feel pressured by anyone including their partner and society. Emphasis, then, in the first part of extract 19 is placed on a woman making her own choice without external influence, thereby occluding the ways women are constrained in regards to the choices they make. This finding supports the literature which states that 'woman' and 'mother' have become synonymous in current cultural attitudes (Mollen, 2006). Research and statistics show that there is a growing number of women choosing not to have children in the UK, USA and Australia (Mollen, 2006; Kamalamani, 2009), however pronatalist discourses continue to dominate

dialogue with childfree women often being criticised by their family, peers, therapists, the media and even complete strangers (Mollen, 2006).

McCallister and Clark (1998) discuss how national statistics and many studies fail to distinguish between women who are voluntarily childfree and women who are involuntarily childless, thereby treating them as a homogenous group. They argue that this also reflects a lack of understanding of the process behind choosing whether or not to have children and makes it difficult for researchers to monitor time-trends effectively. Further, McCallister and Clark describe planned parenthood as being seen as the 'ideal', however they highlight how in the 1990s little research had been carried out which examines the decisions people make to become parents or not. Kamalamani (2009) argues that despite increasing numbers of childless and childfree women in Western countries, there is still a lack of research on the subject. She suggests that greater awareness of women's reasons for being childless or childfree is needed to counter generalisations and misunderstandings, and, like McCallister and Clark (1998), she suggests that previous research on the subject has tended to lack sensitivity and care in regard to people's fertility decision-making.

In terms of genealogy, motherhood has been held up as the model for healthy female development in adult women since the early twentieth century (Mollen, 2006), whereas choosing to be childfree has been primarily depicted negatively by the disciplines of psychiatry and counselling (e.g. Freud, 1949, as cited in Mollen, 2006). This discourse is still entrenched in contemporary urban, industrial and rural societies (Gillespie, 2003) with the role of motherhood often being constructed as predetermined and as a natural life course for women (Graham & Rich, 2012; McQuillan et al., 2012). Gillespie (2003) discusses how motherhood is seen as not only constitutive of a woman's social role and her feminine gender identity, but is also seen as desirable and fulfilling for *all* women. Letherby and Williams (1999) highlight how many women feel discrepancies between how 'experts' define female identity and their own personal experiences as women and this can lead to feelings of guilt, anxiety, fear, ambivalence and exclusion.

To return again to the genealogy of this heteronormative discourse, Letherby and Williams (1999) also describe how society still assumes that: "'Woman' equals 'mother' equals 'wife' equals 'adult'". (p. 721) and how this assumption still forms

part of medical, political and public discourse, with childfree women being positioned as being 'disturbed', 'deficient' and not 'proper' women. There is still an underlying notion in society that women will 'naturally' want children and 'should' feel devastated if they are unable to bear children (Graham & Rich, 2012). As Kamalamani (2009) points out, stereotypes around childfree and childless women still abound, including those that construct them as 'self-centred', 'immature', 'workaholic' and 'career driven superwomen'. As Kamalamani highlights, there are several studies that have been conducted which contradict these stereotypes such as McAllister and Clark's (1998) findings that career identity was not identified as central to the personal identity of the majority of childfree women; or Hewlett's (2002) study that found female executives in the US cited a wide range of reasons for not having children. Mollen (2006) proposes that negative reactions to childfree women may be because these women challenge the pronatalist ideology that dominates the current socio-political climate. She argues that women who choose to be childfree are on a fundamental level, 'opting out' of mothering, thereby challenging the institution of parenting, problematising the rigidity of gender roles and even calling into question what it means to be a woman.

#### Extract 20

Until recently, babies weren't my priority: I had to find a career, a partner, myself. I'd deal with the motherhood question later. Now I'm 35 and married. 'Later' has arrived – and I'm still solidly, intractably ambivalent. My husband, also undecided, looks to me for guidance. I figured the issue would somehow resolve itself. Like Alyson Hannigan's character on *How I Met Your Mother*, I'd grab my husband one day, and half-sexily, half-scarily demand that he 'put a baby in me!' Or, after many heartfelt, wine-soaked conversations, we'd decide we were too selfish/broke/inept to have children of our own, and toast to a future of aunt- and unclehood. Instead, now that I've entered the five-year period when fertility experts strongly urge women to get busy, the indecision is agonising. (Red, April 2011, pp. 103-105).

In extract 20, the decision of whether to reproduce or not is presented as being a 'high pressure' choice that all women must make. Throughout the magazine dataset emphasis is placed on the importance of women making a choice, in particular as they enter their thirties. Making the decision to reproduce is framed as providing 'peace of mind' for a woman and is cited as being an important decision for women to make for their own mental wellbeing. Inability to make this choice is thereby framed as being painful and agonising while certainty is

constructed as a luxury. It could be argued that in extract 20, the concept of 'choice' is problematised. The subject position of 'maternally indecisive' is presented as being an undesirable one to occupy in this extract and the author discusses how she had never really considered the decision before and hoped it would resolve itself over time. This contrasts greatly with postfeminist constructions of 'choice' as being empowering and liberating for women.

#### Extract 21

Like plenty of my friends and colleagues – happy mums who say they felt nary a tug of maternal desire before they had kids – Rotkirch is quick to reassure that baby lust isn't universal, that I shouldn't wait for it. But, really, I *want* to experience it. I want the luxury of certainty. I've begun to fantasise about it the way some people fetishise romantic love. (Red, April 2011, p. 106).

Extract 21 continues this theme of presenting the position of certainty (i.e. of a woman knowing that she wants to have a baby) as being a desirable one to occupy. Throughout the article from which extracts 20 and 21 are taken, the feeling of desire and wanting to have a baby is referred to as 'baby lust'. In extract 21, the desire for certainty about wanting a child, or to experience 'baby lust' is placed on a pedestal by the author and placed on the same level as desire for romantic love. This desire to experience 'baby lust' is even described by the author herself as fetishistic. In extract 21, Rotkirch, a director of Finland's Population Research Institute, is positioned as an expert on the topic through interviews and quotes. In this extract, Rotkirch (as well as the author's friends and colleagues) are cited as asserting that 'baby lust' is not a universal experience and is something the author should not wait for in relation to making a decision. This assertion raises two questions. The first is on what basis Rotkirch and others are basing this claim (how do they know 'baby lust' is not a universal experience; how do they define this experience; is there any evidence that this experience exists in the first place?). The second is what do they mean by telling the author not to wait for feelings of 'baby lust' to occur? Is the reader being told they should have children regardless of whether they have any 'baby lust' feelings, or are they suggesting she needs to make a decision without the benefit of 'baby lust' to guide her thinking? Given the emphasis of: "that I shouldn't wait for it" I would suggest it is the former being implied here. In both extracts 20 and 21, women are cautioned not to 'wait[ing] too long' and references are made to women in their 30s being urged to 'get busy'. I would suggest these are

references to what is known as ‘the biological clock’. The ‘biological clock’ refers to the association between age and declining female fertility. Faludi (1993) describes how newspapers and magazines draw upon the notion of ‘the biological clock’ to exhort women to begin childbearing in their early 30s if they have not had children already. What this discourse does then is serve to place pressure and constraint on women’s decision-making mediated through ‘cautionary tales’ warning that a choice needs to be made soon, that it is the woman’s individual responsibility to make that choice, and it is them who will have to live with the consequences of their decision.

#### Extract 22

“When you’re in a relationship, people constantly ask what you’re going to do next,” says Sophie, 27, who’s been married for three years. “If you live together, they ask if you’re going to get married; if you’re married, they ask when you’re going to have children. It’s a lot of pressure”. Many of us slide into marriage because it feels like the next step after living together. But you need to be sure you’re prepared for it. Despite the pressure, Sophie is relieved she took the plunge. “My boyfriend and I sat down and talked about exactly how our finances would work once we were married – and we’ve worked hard to divide the household chores fairly. Like any couple, we fight – but establishing ground rules, particularly about money, helps us feel we’re working together as a team.”  
(Glamour, March 2011, p. 131).

In this extract, romantic relationships are not presented as being organic but instead as following a strictly linear timeline along a very particular path (the woman enters into a relationship with a man; partners move into a home together; get married; and then have children). In this rigid and linear relationship timeline there are no possibilities for relationships to follow alternative paths; for example, a marriage which ends in divorce and followed by the woman starting a new relationship or remarrying her divorced partner. As well as discussing the expectations of other people, this extract then goes on to state that many women ‘slide’ into marriage rather than carefully considering it, perhaps because it ‘feels’ like the next step in a relationship after living together. This extract is drawing upon the heterosexual discourse of romantic love. Heteronormativity runs through this presentation of linear relationship patterns with alternative relationship patterns being ignored and absent from the dataset.

In extract 22, a woman called Sophie is quoted by the author, who talks about the pressure she feels when people ask her questions about her relationship such as

whether she is going to get married or have children. This gives the impression of how other people in a woman's life (such as friends and colleagues) press their own expectations of how a relationship should unfold. This then, contradicts (as presented in extract 19) the notion of a woman making the decision to bear children without any external pressure or influence. This also fits in with Mollen's (2006) argument that people such as friends, strangers and therapists may unconsciously bring with them a range of assumptions and judgements influenced by the current pronatalist culture and developmental models which frame childbearing and rearing as normal components of female adulthood. Power can be seen to work through this discourse via the manner a woman's way of being is constrained and limited by expectations regarding how a 'normal' romantic relationship should proceed. In particular, that women should marry their partners, and then have children. Indeed, according to Mollen (2006), established developmental models have either ignored or pathologised adults who choose not to have children. Rather than critiquing the pressure women face as discussed above, the extract moves on to informing the reader that they must be prepared for getting married. The latter part of extract 22 discusses how despite feeling pressure, a woman can feel relieved once they are married and glad they made the decision. The implication is that women who feel pressure to get married may have their concerns dismissed due to the connotation that such worries are followed by relief upon marriage. This discourse then serves those who wish to see the maintenance and bolstering of traditional gender relations. The extract also tries to 'reassure' readers by presenting any potential problems a woman might face in her marriage such as arguments as being a normal thing that couples do, rather than as a sign of any potential problems. In this extract, women are advised to work in partnership with their husbands and establish ground rules. According to this extract, if women prepare for their marriage in advance and talk with their partners then everything will be fine. This then discourages women from exploring more deeply into any potential problems present in their relationship. This discourse represents problems within relationships as being resolvable through talk, and if there are serious problems in a relationship (such as a controlling or violent partner), this discourse could serve to discourage women from challenging those problems.



### Extract 23

My husband Christopher and I got married two years ago, after four years together. This was partly because, well, we loved each other and all that stuff, but mostly because we wanted to start a family.

We didn't quite throw the contraceptives out of the honeymoon window, but we did start trying – in a haphazard, let's-not-worry-about-timing, let's-just-enjoy-the-latex-free-experience kind of way – fairly soon thereafter. When nothing happened, we tightened up on the timings. When still nothing happened, we went to the doctor and he told me I had polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and needed an operation plus ovulation drugs thereafter.

(Marie Claire, March 2011, p. 171).

One point to note about this and the previous extract is the emphasis placed on there being a right time and place to have a baby. For example, a clear message (by implication) is that babies should only occur in marriage. All representations of women having babies in the dataset show the women as also being in stable marriages. No alternative possibilities are made available such as having babies out of marriage (e.g. in cohabitation or as a single parent) or even at an age younger than 25 or older than 35. This arguably gives the impression that women only have babies at a certain age and in certain circumstances, thereby excluding other possibilities such as having children outside marriage or in a same-sex relationship. This heteronormative discourse then privileges certain subjects (i.e. thirty-something mothers in a heterosexual marriage), while placing other subjects (i.e. single mothers, teenage mothers, mothers in a same-sex marriage) in a position of disadvantage. This notion of 'selectivity' in terms of who is encouraged to be a mother and who is not has been noted previously in research (Earle & Letherby, 2003; Rowlands & Lee, 2006).

In extract 23, women are shown to desire having their own 'biological baby'. Women are presented as 'trying for a baby' and when their bodies are unable to provide this; external assistance is sought in the form of fertility treatments such as IVF and ovulation drugs. Other routes to parenthood such as fostering, adoption or surrogacy are not mentioned here, with the implicit message being that biological motherhood is more desirable than other forms of motherhood. Again, this discourse privileges certain forms of motherhood over others. In particular, women trying to have their own 'biological' child is presented as being desirable. Alternative subject positions such as 'adoptive mother' and 'foster mother' are ignored and rendered invisible. The discourse also serves to

medicalise (and therefore arguably pathologise) non-motherhood and Letherby and Williams (1999) highlight how non-motherhood has become medicalised, not only in terms of female identity, but also in terms of the development of reproductive technology designed to 'cure' non-motherhood.

#### Extract 24

A little bundle of joy can test even the most committed couple. "The quality of a relationship tends to dip after having a baby, although it does recover after a year," says Dr Susan Ayers, a senior lecturer in health psychology at the University of Sussex. That's why the right time to talk about flashpoints is before the big event, not afterwards, in the heat of the moment, when the baby's wailing and you're both sleep-deprived. What's the best way to allocate chores? How will you organise finances?

"Parenthood involves adapting to significant changes in roles and identity," says Dr Samuel. This change in roles affects women more than men. When Sophie, 28, discovered she was pregnant she "worried about falling into the cliché of being a frumpy and uninteresting 'mother'." This reaction is common among women with a successful business and social life, says Dr Samuel. "It suddenly feels like your world narrows. You also might have to rely on your partner's income, which can be stressful for women who were previously very independent." After her initial worry, Sophie settled happily into motherhood. "You can never know what having a baby is going to be like, or how you'll feel," adds Dr Samuel. "But talking about potential issues with your partner can help ease the transition." (Glamour, March 2011, p. 132).

In extract 24, there is initially an acknowledgement that having a baby can be a difficult time for couples, but then it is stated that relationships recover after about a year. The extract then advises women that any difficulties that arise could be easily overcome by planning ahead with their partner over matters such as dividing up parenting chores and responsibilities. It could be argued that messages such as this will create pressure for women in having to achieve an egalitarian, even perfect dynamic in their relationship when parenting. There is no room for arguments or moments of crisis here.

In the latter part of extract 24, it is implied that there are some downsides to being a mother. For example, worries about significant changes in roles and identity, in particular a shift from being a financially independent woman to becoming dependent on their partner's income. Concerns such as these are invoked only to then be dismissed by saying that any worries a woman may have will soon fade away as she settles happily into motherhood. This discourse serves the interests of those who wish to see traditional gender roles restored and maintained. This

discourse does this by dismissing concerns about motherhood and presenting the subject position of 'mother' as desirable and unproblematic. It is also implied here that women should and will be happy when adopting a more 'dependent' subjectivity where they become reliant upon their partner (such as in terms of finance). An anecdote is provided of a woman called Sophie who had worries about becoming a 'frumpy and uninteresting mother', who after the birth of her child was described as being happy and no longer worried. No details are provided of how Sophie made the transition to motherhood or how she overcame her worries, perhaps due to the implicit assumption here that motherhood is a natural state which does not need to be discussed and which women will 'fall into' quite easily. Instead the extract (like in extract 23) advises women to talk about potential issues with their partner to help them settle into motherhood. There are no examples in the dataset in relation to this discourse of stories with 'unhappy endings' such as mothers experiencing mental health problems after giving birth. All the stories present images of women who may or may not have concerns about getting married and/or having children, but they always end 'happily ever after'. No alternative stories or spaces are made available in which regrets or unhappiness can be expressed. Ultimately, the subject position of 'mother' is represented as desirable and being easy (even natural) for women to adopt.

It could be argued that the messages presented in this extract could create pressure for women as any difficulties presented by motherhood are constructed as things that are easily overcome and any worries or concerns felt by the woman are framed as being only temporary in nature and soon forgotten about. This contrasts with Hager's (2011) own experience of childbearing and rearing. Hager describes how everyone around her (friends, colleagues and medical professionals) all asserted that only the first days after giving birth are difficult because a new mother has to adjust and get used to having a new and dependent person in their life. She talks about how the physiological responses to childbirth, emotional reactions (such as depression and alienation) are framed as being merely obstacles on the path to adjustment and transition to a happy parenthood and nothing more than that. According to Hager (2011), guidebooks giving advice on pregnancy and parenting primarily focus on the first few months after birth. She argues that this is because they are written based on the belief that infancy is the difficult stage of parenting and everything after that is easier as the child gets older. This discourse then, pathologises mothers who encounter

any serious and/or long-term difficulties in child-rearing. The implication of this is to place pressure on women to be 'perfect mothers' as difficulties are assumed to be easily overcome and that parenting is a smooth process.

#### Extract 25

Now I can contemplate a future filled not (just) with terrors or savagely curtailed freedoms, broken nights and ceaseless responsibilities but with interest and happy anticipation. I have forgiven myself for not enjoying the first three months, but the vast majority of my friends with children tell me that this is perfectly normal and that they didn't either. Now I am looking forward to meeting my baby, to seeing how he or she takes after its parents and to making our parents grandparents and our siblings aunts and uncles. I am, once the surprise, shock and steaming hormones subside, ready for this astonishing miraculous tie that will bind us all together.

(Marie Claire, March 2011, p. 171).

It could be argued that here, babies and the family are romanticised and idealised in the way they are presented, with the family unit being constructed as an unbreakable whole and the baby being constructed as a binding force for the family. This romanticised vision of family glosses over the earlier acknowledgement that children can cause stress and difficulties in a marriage. Instead, the birth of a child is presented as being a happy and 'magical' period. Hager (2011) discusses at great length how it is a norm among mothers not to talk about the difficulties and stresses they are experiencing in parenting. She argues that it is seen as part of being a 'good mother' for a mother to sacrifice herself and her identity.

In the middle part of extract 25, the author discusses how she did not enjoy the first three months of her pregnancy but that she has forgiven herself for this because her friends tell her they went through this too and that this is something normal to experience during pregnancy. Interestingly, it seems that a key aim of this discourse (as can be seen also in extracts 19 and 24) is to reassure women that they do not need to worry about having children and everything will be alright after childbirth. Women are frequently advised in the data not to worry about having a baby as everything will work out fine as long as they plan ahead and work with their husbands. This then raises the question; why do these magazines need to reassure female readers so much about having children?

Hager (2011) explains how women who express the difficulties they are facing such as back-pain or depression become viewed as abnormal mothers and their conditions are dismissed by their peers and medical professionals alike as being 'natural feelings and pains'. Again this heteronormative discourse pathologises mothers who acknowledge and speak out about the downsides of motherhood. This also renders the discussion of difficulties and downsides to parenthood invisible and taboo. This discourse divides women into binary subject positions: 'the good mother' and 'the abnormal mother'. In her classic work on motherhood *Of Woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, Adrienne Rich (1976) argues the 'misery' of mothers is socially accepted and uncontested and that it is as though suffering is the primary identification of women as mothers. This discourse then serves to treat the downsides of motherhood as something which women should accept as 'normal' and that women should not question or challenge the conditions of motherhood (i.e. the disparity between mothers and fathers in relation to the take up of child-caring responsibilities).

#### Extract 26

Honestly, my life would be easier if I were simply gay or straight. But I'm neither. Zoe is 31, and thinking about babies. If she is The One, and I really think she might be, then we'll need help from an outsider to have kids. We'll never be able to coo: 'She has my nose but your hair!' which is difficult, especially knowing I could have that if I split up with Zoe and met a man who was right for me. But I'm not going to end something amazing for the sake of being with someone who might never come along. Because, in the end, I don't love Zoe because she's a woman. I love her because she's Zoe – the most incredible person I've ever met."  
(Company, May 2011, p. 70).

In extract 26, the author, who is in a same-sex relationship talks about how her partner wants to have babies. Alternatives such as adoption or fostering are never presented to the reader. In extract 26, lesbian couples are presented as being unable to achieve 'the dream' of having their own 'biological baby' and therefore as 'lacking' in comparison with heterosexual couples. The subject of 'heterosexual mother' is privileged, while the subject of 'lesbian mother' is placed at a disadvantage and rendered as undesirable. The possibility of lesbian couples adopting (as with heterosexual couples in the earlier extracts) is never considered as a possibility here. In this extract, lesbian couples wanting children are clearly rendered as 'other' and as 'less than'.

Also in extract 26, the author discusses how difficult it is being attracted to men and women and says that she would find it easier if she was 'simply' gay or straight (the author never defines herself as bisexual). It would appear that different types of relationships are being placed in a power hierarchy (at least with regard to their potential for producing offspring) here with the potential heterosexual relationship being placed at a higher and more desirable level than the existing same-sex relationship. In this extract, the author refers to her same-sex partner as 'The One' and positively describes her with words like 'incredible'. She states that she does not love her partner because she's a woman but loves her for who she is. Statements such as these and use of terms like 'The One' imply discourses around romance and the relationship imperative are being drawn upon. The relationship imperative exhorts people to enter relationships and renders the status of 'being single' as undesirable. Uses of terms such as 'The One' implies that everyone has a 'soulmate', i.e. a person who they are meant to be in a relationship with. Usage of concepts such as 'The One' constructs a relationship as being perfect and occludes any potential for difficulties. Again, possibilities such as relationship breakdowns and divorce are not acknowledged.

To recap, a traditionalist discourse of necessary heterosexuality and romance was identified as operating throughout the magazine dataset. This discourse centres around notions of relationships taking on very specific forms (heterosexual) and progressing in a traditional and linear manner (dating, followed by marriage, and then having children). This discourse is deployed to dismiss any potential worries a woman may have about marriage and/or having children. The implicit assumption is that there will always be a 'happily ever after' for women who follow this traditional route. Also, implicit throughout the magazines is the notion of a woman's reproductive destiny, that she does want to have children, it is just a matter of working out when she is ready, as opposed to whether she wants them or not. This discourse also constructs desire for children in terms of biology, it is implied not only that women want children, but they want *biological* children of their own. This discourse is deployed to suggest that *all* women desire to have their own biological children. No space is made available for the possibility of women adopting children, seeking out IVF treatments, or even choosing to remain child-free.

## 5.6 Summary of the chapter and final remarks

In Study 1, three discourses were identified running across the magazine dataset. Two of these were postfeminist discourses constituted in different ways. One was constituted with individualist notions around self-improvement, individual responsibility and self-surveillance. Through this discourse, women were exhorted to continually work on themselves in order to become not necessarily better people, but better workers and to achieve the 'dream job'. Great emphasis was placed on self-monitoring the body in order to maintain a particular body size/shape and become more beautiful, rather than for health reasons. The other postfeminist discourse was constituted by the notion of 'girl power' and a 'phallic girl' (or 'ladette') subjectivity. This discourse was deployed in a curious way in that while women were presented as having greater freedom (particularly in relation to sex), this was frequently interwoven with 'cautionary tales'. These were about 'warning women' of the risks of adopting a 'phallic girl' subjectivity implying it would only lead to misery and loneliness (read: not in a heterosexual relationship). Perhaps though this is not so surprising given that the third discourse was centred around the 'heterosexual imperative' and women's 'reproductive destiny'. Relationships were constructed in an arguably traditional and linear form (dating, marriage, child-bearing and rearing). There was an implicit assumption running throughout that women desire to be part of a heterosexual relationship and to have their own biological children (within this relationship). In sum, while on the surface the magazines appeared to endorse notions of 'girl power' and the 'ladette' lifestyle, this was always kept in check with warnings and an underlying message that women 1) desire and 2) would be happier in a traditional heterosexual relationship (i.e. married with children).

In the next chapter, the focus shifts on to Study 2 which was a media text study of feminist blogs. This follows the same structure as this chapter, with a recounting of the data collection methods used, followed by a presentation of the findings.

## **CHAPTER 6 - STUDY 2: 'REBEL GIRLS WILL SAVE THE WORLD'!**

### **IDENTIFYING CONSTRUCTIONS AROUND GENDER AND FEMINISM IN FEMINIST BLOGS**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

##### *6.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The main purpose of this chapter is to discuss the second research study conducted. Study 2 identifies and examines the discourses (relating to gender and feminism) made available in feminist internet blogs. This data was collected via a media text study and analysed using a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis. The first part of this chapter outlines the data collection method used in Study 2. I will begin by describing my initial choice of a sample group (feminist zines) and explaining why this group had to be ultimately rejected, before moving on to discuss the new sample group (feminist internet blogs) selected for this study; followed by an explanation of the sampling process. In the second part of this chapter, the construction and deployment of each discourse identified in the blog dataset will be presented and discussed. Two discourses were identified as operating across the feminist blogs dataset: 1) “Do what you want. How you want”: a postfeminist discourse as constituted by ‘girl power’ notions of aspiration, empowerment and personal choice; and 2) “Are you feminist enough?”: a feminist discourse of ‘the good feminist’.

#### **6.2 Method of data collection**

##### *6.2.1 Sampling of material for analysis*

Initially, the decision had been made to analyse independently published and distributed feminist ‘zines’ rather than online feminist blogs. This was because originally this research project was only going to focus on ‘print’ based media rather than looking at online sources. During the process of sampling the zines, difficulties arose. Zines were selected based primarily on their focus of content. This means zines with a general focus on feminism were selected as opposed to zines with a specialist focus (e.g. anti-pornography, women in history, women in



literature etc). As the sample group from Study 1 consisted of six magazines sampled across three months, the goal was to balance the samples by sampling from the same number of zines across the months of March, April and May. Unfortunately, due to the precarious nature of independent/self-publication this was not possible. Unlike in the USA (which has *Ms.*, *Bust* and *Bitch*), the UK currently has no long-running feminist zines. *Spare Rib* which began publication in 1972, ceased running in 1993. Since then, there have been numerous zines running in the UK for various lengths of time. Some zines started running in the 2000s, and while some were still running (e.g. *KnockBack*) when I began sampling for Study 2, others had recently ceased publication (e.g. *Subtext*), or had converted to an online blog format (e.g. *Uplift*). Many zines have an irregular publication frequency. Some are published quarterly or biannually, others are less regular and gaps between issues can span almost a year or more. The current economic crisis may be a factor in this as even mainstream magazines were not circulating as highly as they had done in the past (Press Gazette, 2010). Some magazines around this time folded and some have become online only entities (e.g. *Scarlet*). This has particularly been the case with magazines aimed at teenage girls with publications such as *J-17*, *Sugar*, *Bliss*, *19*, *TeenVogue* and *CosmoGirl* all ceasing publication since the mid-2000s.

There were also concerns with the availability and accessibility of several zines as the research was concerned with widespread discourses made available to young women. None of the currently running zines are available in retailers such as newsagents, book shops and supermarkets, but instead need to be ordered online through the zine's own website. Some use a 'shopping cart' system taking customers step-by-step through purchasing a zine (sometimes asking customers to choose their own price point), while others require customers to contact one of the zine's creators and make a 'PayPal' transfer. There are one or two exceptions to this 'online purchase only' availability as some 'zines' are produced by feminist groups based in university student unions and are made available on university campuses and websites. Some zines appear to choose a counter-cultural approach which clashes with standard practices found in mainstream publishing, for example, not including issue numbers, publication dates or other publication details including authentic names of writers. A combination of these factors made it difficult to sample and balance the feminist zines with the sample group of mainstream published magazines.

As a result of these various issues it was decided to reject the sample group of feminist zines and select an alternative sample group which would address the aims of Study 2. As it appeared that in the 2000s and early 2010s there had been a shift from feminists producing zines to creating online blogs it was decided that blogs would be an appropriate sample group.

Before sampling and data collection took place, the research was given ethical approval by the Local Research Ethics Co-ordinator for Psychology at Leeds Beckett University. As Bryman (2008) notes, the Internet has brought up new elements in relation to ethics for researchers. There are debates around the issue of informed consent and whether consent is required by those who post<sup>16</sup> the Internet material the researcher wishes to sample. As Bryman points out, it can also be argued that postings to the Internet are in the public domain, in much the same way that letters to newspapers and magazines are and therefore seeking consent is not required. Pace and Livingston (2005) suggest that postings on the Internet should only be used as data in research if: 1) the information is publically archived and readily available, 2) the information can be accessed without a password being required, 3) there is no stated site policy prohibiting the use of its material, and 4) the information is not sensitive in nature. In sampling data from blogs, I abided by Pace and Livingston's principles and only sampled from sites which were publically accessible and not password-protected. I also respected blogs with explicit policy statements requesting material not to be used (such as for journalism or research purposes).

Several decisions were made in the process of sampling the blogs for Study 2. The first step taken in sampling the online blogs was to input a combination of search terms (e.g. 'feminist blogs', 'UK', 'UK-based' etc) into search engines such as *Google*. A blog called *Too Much To Say for Myself* (Elliot, 2010) was found containing a list of 80 UK-based feminist blogs which were listed in alphabetical order. A small number of other UK-based feminist blogs which were identified during the initial internet search, but were not included in Elliot's (2010) list, were added to the list and this new extended list was used as a starting point for

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<sup>16</sup> In the context of the Internet, 'updates', 'posts' and 'postings' tend to refer to texts such as blog posts, website articles, user comments on articles/blog posts/social media, or messages posted by users on forums/bulletin boards/message boards.

deciding which blogs would be sampled. It was decided that five blogs would be sampled for similar reasons it was decided five magazines would be sampled, such as being able to examine a range of blogs while keeping to a manageable number. This number was also chosen to help maintain balance between the two sample groups by keeping them both equally sized samples (Morant, 1998). The online blogs selected were ones which focused on feminism and feminist issues in general rather than focusing on a singular issue/campaign such as 'anti-pornography', 'anti-Hooters', 'women in politics', 'women in history' etc. This is because this research is not interested in a particular activist issue or agenda but more general discussion relating to gender and feminism.

The next step in selecting the blogs was identifying the number of authors writing for the blog. It was decided to select only blogs written by two or more authors rather than blogs written by a single person in order to achieve parity with the magazine sample group. Magazines (and also independently published 'zines') are generally written by teams of writers rather than a single person. It has to be acknowledged here that this decision is far from perfect, unlike with printed material, not all articles written for blogs are reviewed and approved before being posted. A second reason for not selecting blogs with single authors, was due to how many of these tend to be more personal in nature like an individual's journal or a diary. In the case of one or two of these personal blogs, the author had posted a statement linked on the home page asking visitors not to link to their blog, or use material from their blog such as for research purposes. In regards to blogs where such requests were explicitly stated, as I noted earlier, I chose to respect the author's wishes and moved on to the next blog in Elliot's (2010) list.

In order to balance the online feminist blog sample group with the mainstream magazine group it was originally intended that five blogs would be selected and 30 units of meaning (30 articles) would be sampled across the months of March, April and May in 2011. However, difficulties were encountered with this as blogs are updated infrequently rather than to any predetermined schedule (as is the case with published magazines). This means the number of articles posted on a given day or even within a given month can vary. Some blogs have several articles posted each day while others may only have one or no articles posted within a month. This meant that several of the blogs did not have sufficient postings to provide enough units for analysis over the three-month period. As a

result of this, a decision was made to extend the length of time the articles would be sampled from for each blog to a six month period. This means the articles were sampled from across the time period of December 2010 – May 2011. In light of the difficulties in finding blogs with enough material from the selected time period for this study, the main selection criteria which was developed for selecting blogs after the above criteria (regarding focus of content, time period and number of authors) was whether the blog had enough articles to be sampled from the selected time period.

The five blogs selected were: *FemAcadem*, *Feminazery*, *The F Word*, *Mookychick*, and *Uplift*. Articles were selected from the time period of December 2010 – May 2011 (see Table 3 below).

*Table 2: Targeted feminist blogs and the number of articles sampled from each title.*

<b>Blogs</b>	<b>Months articles sampled from</b>	<b>Total number of articles sampled</b>
FemAcadem	December 2010 January 2011 March 2011 April 2011	6
Feminazery	January 2011 February 2011 May 2011	6
The F Word	December 2010 January 2011 February 2011 March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	7
Mookychick	Dates not provided for articles.	7
Uplift	February 2011 March 2011 May 2011	4

<b>Total units of meaning collected</b>	<b>30</b>
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The sampling of articles varied slightly for each of the blogs due to the amount of material available on each. In the case of three of the blogs (*FemAcadem*, *Feminazery* and *Uplift*) all articles from the selected time period were sampled as this provided just enough units of meaning (Morant, 1998) to be analysed leaving no room for articles to be rejected. Six articles were sampled from *FemAcadem* and *Feminazery* each. As only four articles could be sampled from *Uplift* (and the aim had been to sample six articles from each blog) it was decided seven articles would be sampled from *The F Word* and *Mookychick* each. In contrast with other blogs, *The F Word* had a very large number of articles from the selected time span and so it was decided to sample the articles from the 'Features' section. This section consists of slightly longer articles (three or four pages in length on average) and ones written by regular contributors to the blog rather than guests. The next step taken was to randomly select one article from each month across the selected time period (December 2010 – May 2011), plus one extra article from one month (March 2011) to compensate, as mentioned above, for there being fewer articles sampled from *Uplift*. Finally, *Mookychick* was sampled in a different way as it is a blog with different themed sections (Feminism, Style, Health and Beauty, etc). All the articles were sampled from the 'Feminism' section. As no dates were provided for any of the articles on *Mookychick*<sup>17</sup>, two 'marker' articles were identified. These were articles which could be approximately dated as they referred to specific events in the past tense (e.g. referring to an event such as a concert or music festival happening the day before the article was posted). The 'marker' articles were from December 2010 and June 2011 and so seven articles from the middle point between these two 'marker' articles were selected. Articles from each blog were selected based on a combination of length (longer articles favoured over shorter articles) and based on whether they shed light on the aims of the research. Selected articles from each blog were copied and pasted into individual Microsoft Word documents (with information such as URL and posting date included), printed out and filed.

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<sup>17</sup> At the time sampling took place. The *Mookychick* website has since been refurbished (September-December 2014) and articles re-uploaded.

### **6.3 “Do what you want. How you want”: a postfeminist discourse as constituted by ‘girl power’ notions of aspiration, empowerment, and personal choice**

An overarching discourse which was identified in the blog dataset is a postfeminist discourse which was also found in the magazine dataset. In the blogs, a postfeminist discourse was identified as constituted by ‘girl power’ notions of aspiration, empowerment, and personal choice. Postfeminist discourse has been argued to comprise of the contradictory elements of feminism and anti-feminism within it, which has been referred to as a ‘double-entanglement’ by McRobbie (2009). This double-entanglement comprises of several features including a focus upon individualism, choice, empowerment and self-surveillance (Gill, 2007b).

Tied in with this discourse are autonomy, individualised responsibility, self-discipline and self-surveillance which are all underpinned by the principle of individualism (Gill, 2007b). As discussed earlier in regards to the magazine data, the principle of individualism is also the foundation of neoliberal discourse suggesting a sharing of core values between it and postfeminist discourse. From the perspective of both these individualist discourses, personal choice, individual responsibility and self-determination are seen to be key features of everyday life. In the following two extracts the author is talking about how women need to stop ‘self-abusing’ (such as through calling themselves ‘fat’ or describing their hatred for certain personal body parts such as the thighs):

#### Extract 27

Beauty - in projection and perceiving - is 99.9% attitude. Stop trying to impress the opposite (or same) sex. Do what you want. Dress how you want. Do your make up how you want. Mostly, woman [sic] dress to impress other women. Who gives a damn? Impress yourself. Strut yourself. Do wear those three inch heels to school. Do try a different style. Do gravitate towards what feels right. Don’t let others mandate your style because eventually, they’ll control your life, too. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and it may be necessary from time to time to give a stupid or misinformed beholder a black eye.”  
(Mookychick, 2011a, p. 1).

### Extract 28

Sure, everyone gets down. Everyone falls into their moments where the only safety nets seem to be chocolate and Ben & Jerry's (mmm...), and that's perfectly fine. For a short amount of time. But somehow, you need to get out of that funk before the hurtful words and downright abuse come rushing out of your mouth in a smell, verbal diarrhea. Talk to a friend, listen to a band you love, cuddle up with an old stuffed animal. When I feel down, I watch videos of laughing babies. Sure, it sounds weird, but it's so adorable and it makes me laugh every time. Laughing and smile [sic] actually release endorphins (happiness) in your brain and make you relax. Find your "happy place" and live there for a little.  
(Mookychick, 2011a, p. 1).

As can be seen in extracts 27 and 28, readers are being advocated to change the way they think about themselves and do things which make them happy. While on the surface this appears to be presenting an 'empowering' and 'feminist' message, the suggestions being made are very individualist in their approach. Readers are exhorted to start seeing themselves as 'beautiful' and to find a 'happy place' such as through talking to friends. There are several features of these two extracts that warrant further discussion. At a surface level this discourse appears to constitute a challenge to dominant discourses and ideologies around what society and/or the media tell women they need to do in order to be seen as 'beautiful'. 'Beauty' is constructed as something which is self-determined by the individual, rather than acknowledging that notions of what is 'good', 'worthwhile' and 'beautiful' are not derived in a cultural vacuum (Gill, 2007c). Women are recommended to 'do what they want' and 'dress how they want', instead of doing what other people and what society wants them to do such as dress a certain way or wear their make-up in a certain way. This could be argued to be oversimplifying issues around beauty. The discourse is reducing the issue to it being simply a case of self-determination, where all women have to do is change their 'state of mind', but this does not acknowledge the complexities of what Wolf (1990) calls the 'beauty myth'. This discourse thereby obscures the power being exercised over women via the 'beauty myth' which places pressure on women to engage in beauty practices. This then serves the interests of the beauty industry and marketing and advertisers, as this discourse deflects responsibility for women feeling pressured away from industry and instead places it on the individual woman who has to negotiate and overcome such pressure on her own.

It could be argued that the discourse of personal empowerment being drawn upon by the blogs simplifies what are complex power relations being played out between women and the beauty industry. The 'beauty myth' encompasses the notion of 'beauty' being something universally desired and something women want to embody. Wolf (1990) discusses at great length how the 'beauty myth' creates pressure for women to work on their bodies to meet an 'idealised' version of womanhood. This pressure, she argues is generated by culture, institutions and intuitional power and because of this pressure, women work on 'improving' their bodies through practices such as dieting and cosmetic surgery. In contrast, nowhere in extracts 27 and 28 is there any acknowledgement of the cultural pressures women experience in regards to 'beauty'. Instead the concern a woman may feel about her appearance is blamed on herself. Women are represented as trying to 'impress' other women and there is an underlying assumption that they 'should' only seek to 'impress' themselves. This could be argued to be victim-blaming as it is implying women themselves are the source of the problem and need to 'stop worrying' about what other women think. What is also interesting about the suggestion that women should only perform beauty practices 'for themselves', is that this is also a message which was identified in the magazine data, promoting the idea that women use beauty practices to 'please themselves' and make themselves feel good (Gill, 2007b). Gill (2007b) argues that this discourse ignores the external pressures women face to take up beauty practices such as wearing make-up and high heels; instead it frames these practices as the woman doing things 'for herself' and therefore as 'liberating' and 'empowering'. According to Gill (2007b), in postfeminist discourse, the body is presented as being a source of a woman's 'power' and as a key source of her identity. This then disempowers feminists who take exception to this and try to challenge the cultural pressure women face to engage in beauty practices. By presenting beauty practices as something a woman does 'for herself', this constructs beauty practices as the choice of the liberated and empowered woman, and constructs feminists who challenge this as 'bitter', 'dowdy' and 'anti-choice'.

As well as being underpinned by individualism, a more aggressive approach towards challenging other people's attitudes towards 'beauty' is encouraged. This is implied through the reference to giving some people a 'black eye' if they are 'stupid' or 'misinformed' about what 'real beauty' is. This aggressive approach



sounds like it is drawing upon aspects of Do-It-Yourself feminism [DIY feminism] aka grrrlpower (Harris, 2001). DIY feminism emerged out of a combination of punk and feminism in the early 1990s and argues for a 'new girl-centred' feminism. According to Harris (2001), DIY feminism focuses on young women's anger as a feminist tool, with an emphasis on 'autonomy', 'sassiness', 'sexiness' and 'aggression'. DIY feminism aims to represent young women as being not only angry, but also as taking action and being 'in charge'. As Fudge (2006) observes, grrrlpower was appropriated in the late 1990s by marketers and the media and transformed into what became known as 'girl power'. Inevitably, girl power was a watered-down and depoliticised version of what came before it.

The second thing is that the advice promoted in extract 28 could be argued to share similarities with the advice given by the women's magazines as can be seen in the discussion of the magazine dataset. There were extracts from magazines such as *Glamour* which gave suggestions provided by self-help gurus on how to 'be happy' and 'successful'. The advice these gurus gave were all variations of 'visualise a happy future' and then 'make it so' through willpower alone. Here, the magazines constructed 'happiness' and 'success' as something that can be achieved simply through 'willpower' and 'self-determination', thereby putting the onus of 'achieving success' entirely on the individual. Similarly, here in extracts 27 and 28, the suggestion is that women need to stop verbally self-abusing themselves by finding their 'happy place' and smiling. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001) describe how self-help books promote change through positive thinking techniques such as 'willpower' and visualisation. Positive thinking as an approach implies that all an individual needs to do to 'be happy' is to change the way they think. McRobbie (2009) explains how postfeminist discourse emphasises that women must take personal responsibility for their actions in order to avoid the possibility of victimhood. This emphasis on personal responsibility and self-determination obscures the social and political forces constraining the individual and instead places the onus of responsibility on women to 'improve' themselves through the use of self-help advice (Gill, 2007b). Like in the magazines, there are echoes here of the way postfeminist discourse encourages women to use their body as a canvas to hide their inner feelings and outwardly show they are happy, confident and 'in control' (Gill, 2007b). Through postfeminist discourse, women are told they need to appear 'in control' and as confident, as well as being happy and non-critical of the status quo in order to be

considered successful women (McRobbie, 2009). Power plays out here, through the way women are told to smile and laugh to make negative feelings go away. In these two blog extracts, just like in the magazines, no consideration is made of addressing the source of the feelings the woman is experiencing or their root cause (such as psychological, cultural, and media) and instead the problem is reduced to the level of the individual and personal responsibility (Baker, 2010; Gill, 2007b). The function of this discourse is to urge women to hide and not acknowledge any negative feelings they may have. It also serves to draw women's attention away from campaigning for and advocating change towards more surface-level and individualised solutions.

A third thing is that it could also be argued that the author's approach to depression in extract 28 is problematic. Depression is constructed as something minor and temporary in nature: "Sure, everyone gets down. Everyone falls into their moments". This, coupled with the emphasis on 'feeling down' being 'cured' by watching funny videos or listening to music seems to lack any acknowledgement of more serious mental health issues. It is left to the individual to take responsibility for their own mental health. This could result in women suffering mental health difficulties feeling stigmatised and disempowered when surface-level solutions (such as smile and laugh) do not address or improve their mental health. Again, no acknowledgement is made of the material reality of people's lives; this downplays structural and political factors and instead 'reprivatises' issues such as mental health (McNay, 1992, as cited in Gill, 2007b). The implication of this is that individuals need to take personal responsibility for any difficulties they may face and the consequences of their action/inaction (Baker, 2010; Bauman, 2002b). As Baker (2010) and Gill (2007b) highlight, this emphasis on self-reliance, self-determination and individualised responsibility is the cornerstone of postfeminist discourse.

Another problem with this postfeminist discourse is that it can be argued that it leads to victim-blaming (e.g. in cases of sexual harassment or rape). This victim-blaming can be seen in the following two extracts from the same article which talks about the issue of sexual harassment in the form of street harassment (such as 'wolf whistles' and 'catcalls' from men directed towards women in outdoor public spaces).

#### Extract 29

Though some women may feel flattered by non-sexual comments and seemingly harmless incidents of street harassment, Gray believes there needs to be a blanket approach to tackling street harassment because “if you allow some [types of behaviour], like wolf whistles and cat calls, it contributes to an atmosphere where it’s ok [for worse behaviour to take place].”  
(Uplift, March 2011, p. 1).

#### Extract 30

Further she explains “sharing stories to break the silence around the issue” and “to confront or report street harassers” is equally important in stamping out street harassment, both of which HollabackLDN and LASH<sup>18</sup> have started to do.  
(Uplift, March 2011, p. 1).

In extracts 29 and 30, a discourse of individualised responsibility is drawn upon to advocate women to share their experiences of street harassment with others. This could be said to be drawing upon second-wave feminist practices such as consciousness-raising, which is a practice later adopted by third-wave feminists. Third-wave feminists focus on personal stories and biographies, though have been criticised for tending to leave these under-theorised and at the level of anecdote (Harris, 2001).

It could be argued that there is an underlying feature of victim-blaming in extracts 29 and 30. This is because a discourse of individualism is being deployed which places the onus of responsibility for challenging sexual harassment entirely on women. Here, it is implied that if women do not challenge street harassment when they encounter it then they are contributing to the problem. This is problematic in a few ways and serves the interests of those in positions of power, in particular governments as it deflects responsibility for tackling sexual harassment away from politicians and institutions and directs it towards individual women. The first way this is problematic is that it is blaming women for a culture which objectifies and treats women’s bodies as open to public scrutiny. The second is it oversimplifies the issue, by making it sound as simple as an individual standing up against an harasser. This fails to acknowledge the contexts

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<sup>18</sup> Hollaback and LASH [London Anti-Street Harassment] are feminist organisations aimed at challenging sexual harassment in public spaces. HollabackLDN [London] is the London chapter of the organisation.

in which harassment takes place and the constraints that might operate in these situations. For example, it does not take into account that a woman may be on her own and being harassed by a large group of men, particularly if this is in a lonely and/or isolated location.

It could be argued that victim-blaming can also be seen in extract 29 from a different angle to the one in extract 30. In extract 29, there is the suggestion that some women may like the experience of street harassment as they see it as a compliment and they feel flattered by such incidents. It is also implied that some women may see street harassment as harmless and not worth challenging. The perspective that 'wolf whistles' and 'cat calls' are innocent and flattering is one shared by journalist Levenson (2009) and other writers from the 1990s onwards who reject what they see as second-wave 'prudishness'. It is interesting that, those such as Levenson (2009) seem to embrace street harassment in order to reject victimhood and instead adopt the subject position of 'confident active agent' who does not see all men as potential rapists. At the same time, extracts 29 and 30 are perhaps also trying to reject potential claims of victimhood by instead recommending women 'take charge' of the issue. This could be drawing upon elements of 'backlash' rhetoric which frames second-wave feminism as 'victim feminism' (Oakley, 1998).

Critics of 'victim feminism' such as Wolf (1993) argue that positioning women as victims rob them of their agency and also absolves them of taking responsibility for themselves. Wolf argues that for women to be truly equal to men they need to be allowed to be autonomous and free to assert their rights. According to Oakley (1998), the backlash against 'victim feminism' is one of the reasons why many young women do not identify with feminism. Other critics of 'victim feminism' such as Katie Roiphe (1994) argue feminists are humourless and see offence where none is intended, while others such as Rene Denfeld (1995) frame feminists as 'new Victorians' who see themselves as 'chaste victims' of 'male predators'.

#### Extract 31

Finally, I find the Avon and Somerset Police's suggestion that local women should avoid going out alone at night until Yeates's killer is caught staggering. Statistically, young men are far more likely to die as a result of violent crime than women, and yet I have never heard the police issue a statement suggesting that men submit themselves to a voluntary curfew. It seems unthinkable to subject men to any curtailment of their freedom to

travel and socialise as much as they want, no matter how much danger they may be in. And yet if a woman is killed, especially a young, attractive woman, even if there is no evidence whatsoever that she was killed because she was a woman, the motive is immediately assumed to be sexual and all women in the area are held to be at risk and expected to make themselves prisoners in their own homes, or it will somehow be considered to be their fault if they are subsequently attacked. (FemAcadem, January 2011, p. 1).

In extract 31, the author could be argued to be challenging victim-blaming messages in regards to issues such as street harassment and rape. As discussed in relation to extracts 29 and 30, victim-blaming is one of the implications of postfeminist discourse as it places great emphasis on individualised responsibility. In contrast with extracts 29 and 30, extract 31 appears to be critical of the police who are placed in the subject position of 'victim-blamers' placing responsibility for rape on women instead of the perpetrators of rape. The police's advice that women submit themselves to a voluntary curfew is equated with curtailing women's freedom to travel and socialise as they wish. Valenti (2007) talks about how women do various things throughout their day-to-day lives such as carrying keys in their hands, locking their car doors and avoiding certain areas. Like is being suggested extract 31, Valenti (2007) believes that women are making themselves prisoners of their own homes by living to a 'rape schedule'. Valenti, stresses that while taking precautions is not in itself a bad idea, it is 'disturbing' how these behaviours are so ingrained into women's daily routines that they are rarely questioned and taken for granted.

As well as challenging victim-blaming, there are examples of challenge to postfeminist discourse in relation to ideas around personal empowerment and 'liberation'. Postfeminist discourse of empowerment, as highlighted by Gill (2007b), encompasses the notion that women are 'autonomous agents' who can do what they want without any external constraints. This discourse can be seen being challenged in the following two extracts:

#### Extract 32

I'm all for strong, individual women pursuing their passions, but why should they have to resort to peeling off the layers in order to grab attention? Or is this, in fact, women stressing their independence by wearing whatever they please? (Mookychick, 2011f, p. 1).

### Extract 33

I'm not calling for an [sic] campaign of Mary Whitehouse standards by any means - but flesh-flashing feels more like a reliance on a tool than a celebration. Do women really need to rely so heavily on their bodies and overall image on the quest for success?  
(Mookychick, 2011f, p. 1).

In these two extracts from the same article, there are several things going on. The first is that a postfeminist discourse of empowerment which centres round the idea of women being strong, independent individuals is challenged. In this case, women showing their 'independence' by stripping off clothing and 'flashing' their skin to audiences (such as fans of pop music). This could be said to be an example of 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005) or what McNair (2002, as cited in Gill, 2007b) refers to as 'striptease culture'. Levy (2005) explains how raunch culture refers to the way Western society is becoming increasingly hyper-sexual such as through women's so-called growing interest in pornography, pole-dancing, lap dancing, stripping and exhibitionism. Levy (2005) also highlights how postfeminist discourse suggests that women no longer need to worry about objectification and instead can enjoy raunch culture guilt-free. Gill and Scharff (2011) explain this as a shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, in which women are framed as being confident and autonomous subjects who actively make their own choices. Indeed, the author even queries this stance in the extract, as to whether the women who strip their clothes off (such as pop stars) are doing so to demonstrate their independence.

Postfeminist discourse of empowerment positions women who participate in exhibitionist behaviour such as stripping as being 'active', 'confident' and 'knowing subjects' who make active decisions, rather than being passive dupes and victims of patriarchy (Gill, 2007b; Gill & Scharff, 2011). Through this discourse women are portrayed as choosing to "present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so" (Gill, 2007b, p. 151). This demonstrates a covert exercise of power as sexual-exhibitionism is constructed as the choice of the liberated and empowered woman, while any objection to this is constructed as 'anti-sex prudes' being bitter. By placing women in an active position, this disempowers feminists and makes it difficult for them to challenge sexual exhibitionism. This is due to how positive this

framing of women can appear on the surface, while the only alternative to hyper-sexuality which is made available is that of the 'anti-sex prude' (Gill, 2007b). Walter (2010) argues that terms such as 'choice', 'liberation' and 'empowerment' have been co-opted by a society which promotes to women a hyper-sexual version of femininity, while Turner (2005) argues that mainstream culture has been steadily absorbing porn culture such as porn star fashion, cosmetic enhancements (such as breast enlargements) and Brazilian waxing. At one point, the author of the extract asks whether women really do need to strip in order to succeed, something which Turner (2005) suggests that women do indeed need to do now in order to succeed. Both Valenti (2007) and Turner (2005) argue that women's talents and achievements are overlooked, and instead value is placed solely on their appearance and willingness to participate in exhibitionist behaviour such as for 'lads mags' like *Zoo* or *Nuts* or television shows like *Girls Gone Wild*.

A disclaimer appears woven into extract 33, which takes the form of an explicit expression of support for women's choices. I argue that this discursive strategy serves to create distance from the stereotyped image of the overbearing feminist who polices women's behaviour (Oakley, 1998). This negative image of feminists as trying to control women's behaviour has its roots in backlash discourse (Faludi, 1993), and according to some writers in the early 1990s such as Wolf (1993), feminists are seen by young women as not respecting their choices. If the author of this extract is aware of this stereotype of feminism, she may be trying to deflect potential accusations that she is not respecting women's choice to strip. While questioning postfeminist discourse that stripping is empowering for women, *Mookychick* is arguably engaged in discursive edgework to try and work around negative feminist stereotypes.

While *Mookychick* is challenging this postfeminist discourse of 'raunch culture as independence', this challenge is qualified with a statement that this is not a call for a 'Mary Whitehouse' level of campaigning. Mary Whitehouse was a UK-based campaigner, who in the mid-to-late twentieth century, opposed what she saw as an increase in permissive values in society and increasing liberalisation of the mass media and was known for her 'Clean Up TV' campaigns (Stubbs, 2008). Stubbs (2008) claims that feminists at one point supported Mary Whitehouse campaigning against pornography, but highlights how many people did not take Whitehouse or her attitude towards liberal media seriously. According to Silver

(2007), the UK is more tolerant towards the media in the twenty-first century and Mediawatch-uk (a pressure group founded by Mary Whitehouse, formerly known as National Viewers' and Listeners' Association) has become irrelevant and marginalised. This reference to being 'less extreme' than Mary Whitehouse is another deployment of a disclaimer serving to deflect postfeminist and backlash discourse which positions feminists as being 'prudes'.

According to Levy (2005), women who participate in raunch culture see it as 'fun' and 'tongue-in-cheek' and feel that to treat it as problematic in any way is 'uncool' and old-fashioned. Similarly, Turner (2005) queries why there has been a lack of feminist disapproval over this hyper-sexual culture and suggests that in the mid-1990s "many women felt enough had been achieved for feminists to lighten up" (p. 1) and that it had become fashionable to tolerate and even find amusement in pornography. This she proposes led to an opposition to any hyper-sexual aspects of culture such as pornography or 'lads' mags' coming to be seen as prudish, outmoded, 'uncool' and humourless. Oakley (1998) argues that feminism is seen by its critics (such as Naomi Wolf, Rene Denfeld, and Katie Roiphe) to be out of touch with the lives of women today and hold 'puritan' values in regards to sex, thereby turning young women 'off' from feminism. Gill (2007b) contends that to be critical of the shift towards a hypersexual culture is not the same as being 'anti-sex'. Being silent in regards to the hypersexual culture, is something McRobbie (2004) argues postfeminist discourse requires young women to do and she expresses concern about this. In order to be considered a successful modern woman according to postfeminist discourse, any critique of sexism or hyper-sexuality must be withheld. This also serves the interests of the sex industry and publishers of 'lad mags' as it discourages women from challenging or objecting to sexual exhibitionism.

As well as a core of individualism running through the data, a postfeminist discourse of personal choice, or a 'woman's right to make a choice' is also present. As Murphy (2012) discusses, historically, choice was a liberatory concept which represented women's freedom and autonomy in all aspects of life and society, but was conceived in particular relation to reproductive rights such as access to contraception and the right to abortion. By the 1990s, third-wave feminists began to place a lot of emphasis on the importance of personal choice in relation to areas such as fashion and sexuality (Harris, 2001). 'Choice



feminism' permeates discussions of empowerment and in this discourse, all choices are framed as being feminist in nature (Murphy, 2012). Murphy (2012) is critical of this framing as she argues that some choices could be perpetuating patriarchal ideas and often choices being made only help the individual making them and not others.

As discussed earlier in chapter 5, contemporary media represents modern women as placing a high value on the freedom to make individual choices (Gill, 2007b; Murphy, 2012). According to Murphy (2012), the media has eagerly co-opted the language of choice, autonomy and empowerment and uses this as a way of selling products and promoting lifestyles. Both Gill (2007b) and Murphy (2012) argue that this is problematic due to the kind of choices being promoted by the media which are ones that tend to reinforce traditional notions around gender roles. Ferriss and Young (2006) discuss how the notion of choice has diffused over the years (from being about abortion rights to women's consumer choices). The switch in focus to consumer choices (such as make-up, clothing and shoes) has been criticised by second wave feminists as being reductively narrow and false. Ferris and Young (2008) describe how young women, are viewed by second wave feminists as not only having misunderstood the fight for bodily autonomy and control, but also taking gains in reproductive rights for granted. Murphy (2012) argues that the word 'choice' has been decontextualised, erasing any acknowledgement of structural inequities filtering through women's choices and instead has been reduced down to a personal level. Writers who draw upon this postfeminist discourse of choice include Levenson (2009) who sees feminism as primarily being about allowing women the freedom to make their own choices and not be judged for them. Murphy (2012) proposes that the word 'choice' needs to be reclaimed from postfeminist discourse and returned to the term's original usage in the feminist movement.

As can be seen in the following extract, the notion of 'choice' has become quite complex:

#### Extract 34

Except that we're not. And it's one of those things I wish I'd known before getting married, because I would love to have had the opportunity to state my case. I didn't want kids. The idea of being pregnant, giving birth, raising a child...it all makes my flesh crawl. That's not to detract from

those women who do have kids, and who are very happy about it; in fact, I sometimes question how normal it is to have such a visceral reaction to such a natural thing.

It's been three years since I married and I still don't want kids, which is a source of bafflement from some quarters. It's almost as if the ring on my finger means 'baby factory: opening soon!'  
(Feminazery, May 2011, p. 1).

In extract 34, a discourse of choice is deployed to counter the assumptions made by society that if a woman is married she *must* want to have children. Public discourse around marriage is represented as providing no space for the possibility of a woman choosing to be married and child-free. Defago (2005) describes how women who choose to not have children, and particularly married women, are often confronted with confusion, disbelief and even hostility. Interestingly, the author explains how she wishes she could have 'stated her case' in regards to reproduction and being able to clearly express her choices to other people before getting married. What is interesting about this is the implication that it is not enough to simply make a choice and 'live it', but it is also important to proclaim your choice to other people. It could be that this discourse is being drawn upon to suggest there is an element of pride that can accompany making a choice. It could also be interpreted that in this extract, that by adopting the subject position of an 'active free agent', women should feel pride and be able to express their choices publically.

A postfeminist discourse of empowerment and personal choice places emphasis on women feeling confident and secure in the decisions they make. On the one hand, extract 34 advocates the right to have a choice in matters such as reproduction and for the 'active free agent' to be able to proudly proclaim choices made in public spaces. However, on the other hand, there is some discursive edgework woven into the extract: "That's not to detract from those women who do have kids". This edgework perhaps serves to 'soften' the stance on reproduction and make it more palatable to potential readers. As with extract 33, there is a disclaimer at work here to demonstrate respect for other women's choices. I would suggest this is bound up with the way postfeminist discourse privileges 'choice' and everyone's right to make their own choice. Postfeminist discourse then serves to disempower feminists by undermining their ability to question and critique practices, because through this discourse every decision a woman makes is treated as unproblematic. "It's her choice" is a phrase used to dismiss

feminist critique and also in turn constructs feminists as trying to dictate what women can and cannot do. Respect for women's choices, seems to be a key feature of the postfeminist discourse of 'choice'. This can be clearly seen in the following two extracts in which the author argues for women to not only be free to make the decision in how to feed their baby, but also to be supported in their choice.

#### Extract 35

That doesn't mean that people should always HAVE to breastfeed. People should breastfeed if they are in the privileged position of being supported and able to do so, if they want to and that's that. I don't care HOW you feed your baby, I care if you're supported in doing so. I care if you have full access to ACCURATE and valid information which enable you to make your choice. No one should be shamed for parenting decisions- we do the best we can, with what we have at the time, and perhaps with different circumstances we'd make different decisions.  
(FemAcadem, March 2011, p. 1).

#### Extract 36

Jessica Valenti wrote this piece in The Daily recently. I totally agree with her sentiment that mothers shouldn't be made to feel guilty. Breastfeeding is awesome and leads to much improved health outcomes both long and short term for Mothers and Babies. However, it's also incredibly hard work and not everyone will be able to access support to breastfeed. Some women, will have issues that mean they are *physically unable* to breastfeed. For some women, particularly those with premature babies in NICU's the act of pumping breast milk can be incredibly stressful, particularly with no baby physically demanding milk to stimulate production. I get that. For these and a whole host of other reasons, which include not being mean, arsey people, we shouldn't be making any woman feel guilty about how she chooses to feed her baby.  
(FemAcadem, March 2011, p. 1).

In extracts 35 and 36, great emphasis is placed on the importance of respecting women's choices. A mother's choice is constructed as a decision that is only of concern to herself and no one else. It is suggested that what matters, is that women are fully supported in their choices. Here, postfeminist discourse operates to position people who do not respect women's choices as 'terrible people'. As already noted earlier, this group of 'terrible people' can include feminists if they question or critique any choice a woman makes or any practice she engages with. This discourse also renders issues such as breastfeeding as strictly

'personal' in nature and are relegated to the private sphere thereby depoliticising such issues.

It is also interesting how an extreme case formulation is made in extract 36 of women being unable to produce breastmilk as a reason for not breast feeding. Firstly, this is an extreme case as it is uncommon for women to not be able to produce breastmilk. Other potential reasons for choosing not to breastfeed are not referred to. For example, women who simply do not want to breastfeed or are repulsed by the process. It can also be argued that referring to women being unable to produce breastmilk is not particularly compatible with the incitement to choose as this is a case where 'choice' has already been stripped away from the woman due to forces beyond her control. Secondly, there is scant acknowledgement of any structural or cultural forces which may be impacting on a woman's choice in relation to breastfeeding. For example, demands of employment, childcare responsibilities for other children, or disapproval of breastfeeding in public spaces. While I agree women need to be supported if they choose to breastfeed or not, this I believe needs to go beyond simply individuals expressing support. By focusing only on individuals making a choice and others supporting that choice, renders the issue of breastfeeding to the personal and private sphere, thereby making it difficult for feminists to campaign for improvements and developments in supporting mothers. For instance, campaigning for more public spaces to be accepting, tolerant and welcoming to mothers who breastfeed.

The discourse of choice is also deployed in the blogs in relation to parenting, music tastes, and clothing. This can be seen in the following extract in which the author talks about how children should be supported not only by their family, but also by society in their choices.

#### Extract 37

If her son is transgender, and decides to transition, he will have a supportive family. He'll be very lucky. But he shouldn't just have a supportive family. He should have a supportive society - he should grow up in a culture that doesn't demand that boys wear trousers and play with guns and girls wear dresses and play with dolls - instead he should grow up in a culture where the clothes a person wears aren't invested with ideas of gender, and right and wrong. There are no "wrong" clothes for a child (push-up bras for seven year olds excepted). There are no "wrong"

clothes for an adult, for that matter. Especially not predicated on ideas of gender.

(Feminazery, January 2011, p. 1).

In extract 37, society is constructed as not being supportive of choices made by children, nor as supportive of transgenderism in children (and in general). It does seem however, that there are some limits in regard to supporting choices. In the case of clothing, there are no wrong clothes for children or adults in relation to the gender of the wearer. Choices children make to wear clothing not normally considered as 'appropriate' for their gender is framed as being something which should be supported. However, on the other hand, some clothing choices such as those in relation to age are positioned as being 'wrong' and 'inappropriate': "There are no "wrong" clothes for a child (push-up bras for seven year olds excepted)". This seems to conflict with postfeminist discourse which emphasises respecting other people's choices. Rather, it could be argued that this statement is challenging hypersexual culture, which encompasses the sexualisation of children such as through clothing companies targeting young girls with thongs, belly tops, high heels for babies and various products with the Playboy bunny icon stamped on (Gill, 2007b).

To summarise, there was a postfeminist discourse as constituted by 'girl power' notions such as aspiration, empowerment and personal choice operating across the blogs dataset. In the blogs feminist calls to action were frequently interwoven with deployment of postfeminist discourse. For instance, women's issues were frequently represented as solvable via individual solutions (such as individuals directly challenging men who are harassing them). The right of the individual to make their own choices, was also uncritically placed in a position of value. Often this discourse of choice was drawn upon as part of discursive edgework which served to distance the blogs away from the image of the 'disapproving feminist'.

#### **6.4 "Are you feminist enough?": a feminist discourse of 'the good feminist'**

A second overarching discourse that can be found in the blog dataset is the feminist discourse of the 'good feminist', as well as its flipside, the discourse that being a feminist 'is good'. This discourse draws upon notions around what it

means to be a feminist. This can cover a number of areas including not only how feminists should behave in their day-to-day lives and express feminist debates, but also the importance of acknowledging feminist history and identifying as a feminist.

#### Extract 38

Nevertheless, I began to feel a little slighted by the lack of support I was receiving from my female friends. Most did nothing more than laugh a little at my passionate ideas, or mention that there was a bra-burning taking place next Thursday afternoon if I'd like to attend. On a family drive, my mother told me that she didn't like "feminism", and preferred to call herself an "equalist", whatever that was, and this experience stuck with me. I felt betrayed, and a little indignant. It seemed to me that women had reached a point at which they felt comfortable, and then jumped ship, leaving the last feminists to endure a barrage of insults and allusions to man-hating. (Mookychick, 2011c, p. 1).

In extract 38, disdain is expressed at the lack of support received from other women in regards to feminist beliefs. The author suggests that her friends view feminism as a joke and do not take it seriously. This reflects what research has found in the early twenty-first century, that young women believe feminism is a 'thing of the past' and no longer relevant (Harris, 2010). Interestingly, in this extract, the author uses terms such as 'betrayed' and 'jumped ship' to refer to women who do not identify with feminism. These terms evoke images of soldiers deserting a war. Similarly, in extract 38 feminists are represented as being left to 'endure a barrage of insults'. Again, this evokes imagery of war and constructs those women who are feminists as being like soldiers. Conversely, women who do not self-identify as feminists, are offered only one other subject position to occupy, that of 'traitor to the cause'. It constrains 'ways of being' for women, limiting the subject positions they can adopt. This could be argued to be problematic as it is placing women into two groups, specifically into an 'us vs. them' binary. It is questionable how constructive it is to 'pit' women against each other and consign an entire group of women to the category of 'traitor'.

As already alluded to earlier, the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century has seen a backlash towards feminism (Faludi, 1993; Oakley, 1998) and young women rejecting the feminist label. However, according to Harris (2010) there has been a variety of research which has found that while young women reject the label 'feminist', many do in fact support feminist principles such as

equality, anti-discrimination and inclusion. For example, Bulbeck and Harris (2008) found that over half of young women viewed feminism to be personally relevant, and just under half said feminists share their values. Other research such as that by Aronson (2003) has shown that young women tend to appreciate feminist gains, rather than take them for granted. She also found that young women were aware of persisting problems and ongoing struggles for women's rights. Similarly, Redfern and Aune (2010) claim that in their experience, younger feminists are quick to acknowledge what older feminists have done for women's lives. The author in extract 38 also talks about how her mother does not like feminism or at least the label and prefers the term 'equalist'. This could be the mother drawing upon postfeminist discourse which suggests feminists are not fighting for equality between men and women but for superiority of women. Through the 'good feminist' discourse the term 'feminist' is positioned in a place of privilege, while alternative terms such as 'equalist' are dismissed: "whatever that is".

This discourse places an emphasis on the importance of women claiming a feminist subjectivity, as already seen by the dismissal of possible alternative subjectivities such as 'equalist'. This can also be seen in the data in relation to emphasis being placed on women 'being grateful' for feminist gains. As can be seen in the following two extracts from two different articles, feminist discourse is deployed to suggest that in adopting a feminist subjectivity, women should know about the history of feminism and should acknowledge what feminists have done to improve women's lives today.

#### Extract 39

Feminism has a proud, proud history. Though the word conjures up all the negative imagery it has accrued in modern times, it also conjures up memories of the suffragettes, the advocates for the contraceptive pill in the late 60s, Mary Wollestonecraft herself, and indeed decades of intelligent discourse. The word is inextricably linked to the magnificent achievements of all the great women who have come before us, and to separate ourselves from this rich history would be criminal. Using the word "feminist" is, in essence, an act of gratitude. (Mookychick, 2011c, p. 1).

#### Extract 40

Not pursuing one's goals is a kick in the teeth to the brave feminists who have paved the way to allow other females to try their hand at various activities. Elizabeth Blackwell was the first female doctor. Amy Winehouse has been credited to helping unconventional artists such as Lady GaGa and Lily Allen make it big in mainstream music. Many more women have opened more career options to fellow women by not giving in to external pressures from both men and women by not allowing [sic] themselves short; if they did, it would discredit their hard work because it would then lead one to ask what the point of a woman's ambition was if she couldn't be bothered to finish what she started out to do.

(Mookychick, 2011d, p. 1).

In extract 39, the adoption of a 'feminist' subjectivity is constructed as being a sign of gratitude towards the women in history who have campaigned and worked towards improving women's lives such as gaining the vote and contraception. The author places emphasis here on the word 'feminism' as being linked with something to feel 'pride' in. What the message is here, is that feminism almost has a timeless quality about it. That regardless of what feminism is associated with now, however negative, it has a 'proud history' which should override all other associations. In both extracts 39 and 40, women who do not show any gratitude towards feminists are placed in the subject position of 'ungrateful beneficiary'. Women who choose not to adopt a feminist subjectivity are also represented as constituting 'a kick in the teeth' to feminists. It could be argued that this is quite a judgemental stance towards women who do not call themselves feminist. Within this 'good feminist' discourse there is a lack of acknowledgement of individual women's reasoning behind their disavowal of feminism, such as specific circumstances and/or experiences which may have influenced them. There is also the possibility of some or many women simply not being aware of the history of the women's movement or the need to be aware of it.

In extract 40, emphasis is placed on the importance of women showing their gratefulness to feminists through the pursuit of their ambitions. Women who follow their ambitions are placed in the subject position of 'incredible ambitious women' who do not 'give in to pressure' or 'sell themselves short'. Ambition in this extract appears to be solely linked to careers, thereby leaving no space for women who choose not to pursue a career. It appears then, that according to the 'good feminist' discourse, it is the pursuit of career goals which is valued in women, whereas alternative goals such as housewifery and parenthood are not.



Some, such as Wolf (1993), critique this feminist discourse for not respecting women's choices.

Not only does the 'good feminist' discourse require feminists to claim a feminist subjectivity, but they are also required to raise their voices and speak up about issues affecting women. This can be seen in the following two extracts:

Extract 41

Did I say enough? I doubt it. Do I regret speaking up? Not at all, but I could have said a whole lot more. Was I feminist enough? Probably not.

So how do people do it? Strut around confidently, wearing their feminism like skin? Do you not fear the questions, the jokes, the looks, the nudges, the digs, the isolation, the raised eyebrows, the 'oh, here she comes'?

When I ask myself the same question, I realise I am not so afraid to show my feminism to the world. Perhaps I am feminist enough after all.  
(The F Word, December 2010, p. 1).

Extract 42

I'm not ashamed of my values and beliefs, not in the slightest. I'm just not sure if I'm ready to apply it to the 'real' world and, even if I was, I have my doubts as to whether or not the world is ready for it.

I feel like I have gone out into the big wide world, armed with my three years of feminism, ready to take on whatever crosses my path. Only I feel like I'm alone.

Part of me doesn't want to be known as 'the weird one' or 'crazy feminist', I don't want people to roll their eyes if I start ranting about the low conviction rate for rape. Not that I think my new colleagues will, of course, but will I get the same mutual respect and agreement as I would if I was in a feminist forum? I think not.  
(The F Word, December 2010, p. 1).

In extracts 41 and 42, the 'good feminist' discourse is deployed to suggest that feminists can *never* say enough on issues concerning women such as rape. 'Good feminists' are constructed here as being confident and embodying feminism. In other words, if a woman claims a feminist subjectivity, then there is an expectation that they are someone who can live and breathe feminism like it is a physical part of who they are. Third-wave feminists, according to both Findlen (1995, as cited in Harris, 2001) and Baumgardner and Richards (2000), are the first generation of feminists for whom feminism has been entwined into the fabric

of their lives enabling them to 'live and breathe' feminism on a day-to-day basis. Interestingly, non-feminists are also located in the 'real world', thereby implying that feminism is not part of the 'real world'. Instead, feminists are constructed as outsiders to this 'real world': "Part of me doesn't want to be known as 'the weird one' or 'crazy feminist'".

In these two extracts, feminists are constructed as having mutual respect and agreement, while non-feminists are constructed as disinterested in issues such as rape. Again, this could be argued to be a judgemental stance to take. The 'good feminist' discourse places importance on feminists 'raising their voices' about women's rights issues. It is suggested here that those who do not 'speak up' or confront non-feminists about issues are not 'feminist enough'. This implies that there is more to being a feminist and adopting a feminist subjectivity than simply defining oneself as a feminist and holding feminist beliefs. Instead, the discourse stresses the importance of feminists 'raising their voices' for the 'cause' in order to be considered 'good feminists' or 'feminist enough'. Feminists here are constructed as having fears to overcome in order to become 'good feminists'. Embracing a 'good feminist' subjectivity requires standing up for a cause, regardless of what other people think. Like in extract 39, in extracts 41 and 42 emphasis is placed on the need for feminists to feel pride in feminism and not be ashamed of it. In the 'good feminist' discourse, a feminist subjectivity is constructed via the notion of 'being feminist enough' and framed as requiring more than self-identification. This could then potentially close down the possibility for some woman identifying with feminism if they do not think they are 'feminist enough' (i.e. because they do not speak out on feminist causes).

As well as self-identifying with and embodying feminism, 'good feminists', according to this discourse also need to be conscious of environmental causes linked with gender. This can be seen in the following extract in which the importance of feminists being conscious of how their purchases can impact on the environment is stressed:

#### Extract 43

Any of you environmentally conscious Mooks are most likely not on the best of terms with BP and their counterparts after that little uh-oh of theirs in the gulf stream. To discover that the odd touch of concealer might be

helping them and their friends like them to line their pockets is not a happy thought.

While I'm not saying you should set fire to your foundations, blow up your eyeshadows in a massive fiery explosion, (God knows we all need a little kohl around the eyes now and then) I'm just saying you should be conscious of the products you buy. Check the ingredients, find out whether the brand tests their products on animals.  
(Mookychick, 2011e, p. 1).

In extract 43, the 'good feminist' discourse is being drawn upon to suggest that feminists are concerned with more than one issue (i.e. gender) and focus on multiple issues such as the environment and animal testing. It is implied that not only are feminists concerned with environmental issues, but also do not support corporations such as BP because of oil spillages in the ocean. According to Harris (2010), young women's activism has become broader than feminism encompassing a range of politics not limited to women's issues and gender. Taft (2010) documents a wide range of young women's activism across a range of issues such as child labour, land rights, worker's rights, war and the environment. She describes how young female activists have a joined-up perspective on social justice, rather than focusing on a single-issue such as gender.

It is interesting how it suggested that feminists would not be happy with the idea of providing money to oil companies such as BP through their purchase of make-up products. Boycotting make-up products altogether is not advocated, but instead a middle ground is made available where feminists just ensure they are aware of the ingredients which go into the products and purchase ethically. This is interesting because it is not challenging postfeminist discourses of consumerism and notions of individualised responsibility. Unlike women's magazines, the writers of these feminist blogs are not answering to advertisers or company stakeholders. Arguably, feminist writers have more freedom to write what they want in spaces such as weblogs. As suggested by Harris (2008; 2010), blogs can provide opportunities to produce public selves in 'safe spaces' and also enable young women to articulate their own personal concerns and political views. It could be, that here the author is engaging in discursive edgework: "While I'm not saying you should set fire to your foundations, blow up your eyeshadows in a massive fiery explosion, (God knows we all need a little kohl around the eyes now and then)". This discursive edgework appears to reject the subject position of the 'dowdy feminist' who is disapproving of make-up. As

discussed in chapter 5, postfeminist discourse constructs feminists as punitive, harsh and incapable of articulating women's 'true desires' (Tasker & Negra, 2005). Postfeminist discourse operates to cast feminists as a disapproving 'Big Sister' who forbids 'feminine pleasures' such as make-up and high heels (Sonnet, 2002, as cited in Gill, 2007b). Sonnet refers to this as the 'naughty but nice' effect whereby 'feminine' accoutrements become a 'guilty pleasure' made all the more appealing by being 'forbidden' by feminists. Probyn (1997, as cited in Gill, 2007b) contends that the media are seductively repackaging pre-feminist ideals of femininity as 'postfeminist freedoms' in order to draw young women towards the consumption of beauty products such as make-up. Such discursive edgework (suggesting not all make-up is bad) arguably serves the interests of those who wish to make money from women continuing to buy make-up, such as the beauty industry, advertisers and marketers.

Another way the good feminist discourse has been deployed in the blog data, is to critique postfeminism notions around essentialism and gender difference. In the following extract, *Feminazery* is discussing a UK-television program called *Loose Women* which could be argued to draw upon this postfeminist discourse:

#### Extract 44

Loose Women represents a stereotype of modern feminism that really ought to be dumped in a skip and left there - the derisive giggling at silly men, the better-than-thou attitude, not so much "I am woman, hear me roar!" as "I am woman, hear me knock off yet another mildly amusing anecdote about the time my husband was unable to perform [insert mundane domestic duty here]"

That, my friends, is not liberation. How can it be? Is liberation sticking a bunch of women around a table and inviting them to be insulting? Are we supposed to be proud of this? I'm not; I don't want to be represented, as a feminist or a woman, by this kind of playground-level nonsense.  
(Feminazery, January 2011, p. 1).

As highlighted in extract 44, *Loose Women* tends to involve the panellists telling anecdotes and making jokes in which men (usually their husbands or boyfriends) are the targets and tend to play on gender stereotypes such as that men are incapable of performing domestic chores (e.g. ironing). Gender-based banter is constructed here as neither liberatory nor empowering for women. What is interesting is in this extract *Loose Women* is represented as a stereotype of 'modern feminism'. It could be interpreted that this is suggesting that the show is

representing anti-feminist discourse which places feminists in the subject position of 'man-haters' who fight for female superiority rather than equality between the sexes. The implication here is that in order for women to adopt a feminist subjectivity, then they need to reject the "better-than-thou attitude" which *Loose Women* represents.

In the extract, postfeminist discourse centred around making jokes at the expense of men is framed as being negative and unhelpful for feminism. Similarly, Whelehan (2000) highlighted how there were UK-based television shows in the 1990s aimed at young women (specifically 'ladettes' and 'girlies') including *The Girlie Show* and *Something for the Weekend* which had segments dedicated to women enumerating the flaws of male partners and scrutinising male bodies. Whelehan argues this kind of behaviour is not liberating or empowering for women. Greer (1999) also criticised women in the 1990s for mistaking feminism for the simple reversal of sexual objectification. In other words seeing feminism as enabling women to 'have a laugh' at the expense of men.

To recap, a discourse of 'the good feminist' was identified as operating across the blogs dataset. This was drawn upon to construct a feminist subjectivity in a particular way. 'Good feminists' were constructed as proudly proclaiming their identification with the movement and as people who speak up for causes. 'Good feminists' were represented in contrast to non-feminists, with non-feminists being constructed as disinterested in women's rights issues.

## **6.5 Summary of the chapter and final remarks**

In Study 2, two discourses were identified as running across the blogs dataset. In the feminist blogs there was as perhaps to be expected a feminist discourse whereby 'good feminists' were constructed as those who stand up for causes (such as rape) and proclaim their feminist subjectivity to others. However, interestingly, this was complicated by the way feminist discourse interwove with postfeminist discourse. Feminist calls to action were blended with postfeminist discourse around personal choice and individual solutions. Rather than advocating collective action, the blogs frequently presented solutions which were

individual in nature. Individual women are incited to challenge other people (such as non-feminists who are dismissive of women's rights issues, or even those perpetrating harassment). The blogs are underpinned with a large emphasis on respecting women's choices non-judgementally and uncritically. This takes the form of disclaimers which function to distance the blogs away from the spectre of the 'disapproving feminist' who is dowdy and does not approve of beauty practices such as make-up.

In the next chapter, the focus shifts on to Study 3 which involved mini-focus groups with young women aged 18-30 years. This follows a similar structure to this chapter and chapter 5, though with a slight difference. A recounting of the data collection methods used (including ethical considerations), is followed by a presentation of the first discourse identified in the study. The second and third identified discourses will be presented in chapter 8.

## **CHAPTER 7 - STUDY 3: 'BUT CAN I CALL MYSELF A FEMINIST?' YOUNG WOMEN'S CO-CONSTRUCTIONS AROUND GENDER AND FEMINISM**

### **7.1 Introduction**

#### *7.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the third research study conducted. Study 3 identifies and examines the discourses (relating to gender and feminism) co-constructed by young women (aged 18-30) in mini-focus groups. This data was analysed using a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis. The first part of this chapter outlines the data collection method used in Study 3. I begin by describing the sample group and the sampling process used in recruiting participants. This is followed by a description of how I planned and prepared the mini-focus groups. I then recount how the mini-focus groups were conducted and facilitated.

Over the course of the second part of this chapter, the construction and deployment of the first discourse identified ("What is feminism for? The War is Won") in the mini-focus group dataset from Study 3 is presented and discussed. The construction and deployment of the second and third discourses are presented and discussed in the following chapter.

Before moving onto outlining the data collection methods, I present here a summary of the three discourses which were identified as operating across the dataset. All three discourses identified were postfeminist and were constituted in three different ways. 1) "What is feminism for? The war is won": a postfeminist discourse of feminism as irrelevant, inaccessible and situated in the past. 2) "Sisters are looking out for themselves": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualised notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility and the 'can-do girl'. 3) "We want 'equalityism', not feminism": a postfeminist discourse of gender neutrality as constituted by backlash notions such as 'what about teh menz?'

## **7.2 Method of data collection**

### *7.2.1 Sample group and sampling process*

A total of 28 participants were recruited, spread across seven mini-focus groups. The number of participants in each group are as follows: Focus Group [FG] 1 - five participants; FG2 - four participants; FG3 - three participants; FG4 - five participants; FG5 - three participants; FG6 - four participants; FG7 - four participants.

The sample for Study 3 consisted of young women aged 18-30 years. Women were recruited who live in the United Kingdom and were currently living in towns and cities in the North-East and North-West of England, though some participants mentioned growing up in different parts of the country ranging from the south to the north. Thirteen of the participants were undergraduate students and six were postgraduate students. One participant was a stay-at-home mother, one participant was currently unemployed and looking for work, and seven of the participants were from a variety of employment backgrounds including the fields of business, law, teaching, and caring (e.g. child-care). In terms of ethnicity, 26 of the participants were White-British, one participant was African-Caribbean and one participant was of South Asian heritage (Pakistani). While I did not screen participants for other demographic details (e.g. socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, etc), some participants offered some such details over the course of the group discussions. Three participants were mothers, one participant identified as openly bi-sexual, one participant described themselves as gender-queer. Three participants identified themselves as members of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. One participant described how she was brought up by her grandparents, one participant described her experience of going to an all-girls' school, and another participant discussed her experience of being homeless.

Participants were recruited using a combination of opportunity sampling and snowball sampling. A variety of techniques were used to advertise the study, including posters and flyers placed around the Leeds Beckett University's two campuses (City Campus and Headingley Campus), e-mails posted on mailing



lists (such as PsyPAG<sup>19</sup> and various student societies based in the university) and using the university's Virtual Learning Environment [VLE] Blackboard. Many participants brought their friends along to the mini-focus groups, while in other cases I asked participants if they knew anyone else who may be interested in taking part in the study.

### 7.2.2 *Ethical considerations*

Before recruitment of participants and data collection took place, the research was given ethical approval by the Local Research Ethics Co-ordinator for Psychology at Leeds Beckett University. As part of the ethical approval application process and in later conducting the mini-focus group research, the British Psychological Society's [BPS] (2014) guidelines were drawn upon. According to the BPS "Researchers should respect the rights and dignity of participants in their research" (p. 4) which means researchers have a duty to their participants (such as explaining the nature of the research to potential participants).

Participants were provided with a participant information sheet (see appendix 5) and a copy of the discussion schedule (see appendix 7) for them to read through before deciding to take part in the study. Information sheets were also provided to participants who turned up 'on the day' to a mini-focus group in cases where they were brought along by a friend. The information sheets comprised of a question and answer format, explaining the purpose of the interview, informing participants that their participation is entirely voluntary, what taking part would involve and an estimation of how long participating would take. The information sheet also covered other key points such as the participant's right to withdraw themselves and/or their data from the study, anonymity and confidentiality, reference to the Data Protection Act 1998, and an explanation of the risks and benefits to taking part. In relation to risks, participants were provided with contact details for support services such as the University's counselling service and *The Samaritans*. As well as my own contact details being provided on the information

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<sup>19</sup> Psychology Postgraduate Affairs Group [PsyPAG] is a support group for psychology postgraduates.

sheet, contact details for one member of my supervisory team was included, along with a member of psychology staff who was independent from the project.

When participants arrived at the mini-focus groups, they were again provided with a copy of the information sheet (see appendix 5) and an informed consent form (see appendix 6) to read through and sign. Participants were asked to sign the forms, as well as place their initials next to several statements such as: “I agree to take part in this research. I understand that taking part will involve participating in audio recorded conversations as part of a group discussion”. After the completion of each mini-focus group participants were debriefed and thanked for taking part in the study. The debrief included participants being verbally reminded of their right to withdraw themselves at any time during the study, and their right to withdraw their data up to two weeks after a mini-focus group. Participants were provided with my university-based contact details so they could withdraw their data if they so wished.

After each mini-focus group was completed, the discussions were transcribed into Microsoft Word documents and stored on a password-protected computer. In order to ensure anonymity, all participants were given a pseudonym using a random name generator (Behind the Name, date unknown). Other potentially identifying details were changed to ensure anonymity, such as the names of family members, friends, workplaces, churches, and places of leisure (e.g. night clubs, pubs).

In terms of risk and protection from harm, no participants under the age of 18 were recruited, nor were any participants from vulnerable groups asked to take part. Participants were not asked any questions of a potentially sensitive nature (e.g. experiences of violence, sexual behaviour, etc.). Mini-focus groups were conducted either on university campuses, or in a participant's home. In cases where groups were held at participants' homes, I informed my supervisory team of details such as dates, times, locations and my mobile number. Participants were not required to take part in anything stressful, humiliating or potentially distressing over the course of the study, nor were participants ever deceived in regards to the nature of the project.

### *7.2.3 Planning and conducting the mini-focus groups*

In planning the discussion schedule for the mini-focus groups, I aimed to create a schedule which would generate an in-depth discussion. A pre-planned script of questions was developed, while keeping the aims and research questions for Study 3 in mind. The questions were also influenced by my findings from studies 1 and 2. In the schedule the questions were divided into the following seven topic sections: 1) unpacking being a woman, 2) exploring expectations of women from society, 3) exploring life goals, 4) unpacking feminism, 5) exploring the media. Each section had on average 4-6 questions relating to that topic area. Examples of questions asked include: "What does being a woman mean to you?" and "when you hear the word feminism, what do you think?" (see appendix 7 for a copy of the discussion schedule). As recommended by Litoselliti (2003), I tried to ensure the questions were written in a clear, understandable and non-academic style. I also designed the schedule with a focus on open-ended questions, avoiding closed-questions (such as ones requiring a yes/no answer). I also focused on developing neutral questions in order to avoid leading participants.

In organising the mini-focus groups, I tried to ensure that the time and place of a given group was convenient for the participants. Four of the groups took place in private rooms in Leeds Beckett University and University of Huddersfield. For three of the groups, the discussions took place in the home of a participant taking part in that particular mini-focus group. For each of the groups I provided refreshments for the participants (drinks and snacks) in part due to the relatively long length of time focus groups can last. In two of the groups, participants provided their own refreshments (voluntarily) due to them taking place in their own home. The shortest focus group lasted 2 hours 17 minutes, while the longest lasted for 5 hours and 15 minutes. On average most groups lasted between 2 and a half hours to 3 and a half hours.

When setting up equipment and materials for the mini-focus groups, I chose (where possible) to set up around a large table so participants could sit around it in a circle. A dictaphone was placed in the centre of the table to try to capture everyone's voices as clearly as possible. Before each group, I tested the microphone for its volume sensitivity and would adjust this during discussions depending on how loud or quiet a particular group was. Materials such as

information sheets (see appendix 5) and informed consent forms (see appendix 6) were placed in front of each seat at the table for participants to look through and fill-in on arrival<sup>20</sup>. Litoselliti (2003) recommends that the same moderator is used for all focus groups in a research project in order to reduce the problems of different styles. Litoselliti also emphasises the importance of a moderator being fully familiar with the research topic. For this reason I chose to moderate the discussions myself, rather than training another researcher and prepping them on my research topic. According to Litoselliti, a good moderator must appear to be non-judgemental, opinion-free, and neutral. It is also the role of the moderator to maintain the group's focus, keep discussions on track, put participants at ease (such as through providing a warm welcome and establishing rapport), and guide and facilitate the group in general (such as through the use of prompts and questions to probe participants' answers. During the mini-focus groups I also made notes of discussion points, to help me keep track of the conversations and recap the key points to participants at the end of the discussion. This is because I would end each discussion by asking the participants which discussion point they felt was the most important to them and why. At the end of each session, I thanked the participants and offered to send them a summary of my study's findings if they expressed an interest. In cases where participants contacted me after a group had taken place, I ensured to respond and answer any queries they had.

### **7.3 “What is feminism for? The war is won”: a postfeminist discourse of feminism as irrelevant, inaccessible and situated in the past**

#### **7.3.1 Introduction**

The first discursive pattern identified as operating across the mini-focus group dataset was a postfeminist discourse of feminism as irrelevant, inaccessible and situated in the past. As noted in chapter 2, postfeminism is a contested term which has been utilised in four different ways (Gill & Scharff, 2011). I treat postfeminism as an object of critical analysis. I propose that postfeminism is an

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<sup>20</sup> As noted in the previous section on ethical considerations. Participants were also each sent a copy of the information sheet and the discussion schedule before agreeing to attend a group.

object which incorporates the different elements highlighted by the second, third and fourth usages (Gill and Scharff, 2011). Namely that it incorporates a sensibility characterised by individualism, personal choice, consumerism, subjectification, self-surveillance, retrosexism (the resurgence of traditional, separate feminine and masculine roles), but also elements of McRobbie's (2009) double-entanglement (of acknowledging, but rejecting feminism), backlash, and girl power (notions around depoliticised personal empowerment, reclaiming femininity and individual aspirations and achievement). In the data, postfeminist discourse was drawn upon by participants to refer to the notion that we are currently living in a period which takes place *after* feminism.

A key part of this discourse is the assumption of feminism's 'pastness' and this can be utilised in tones of celebration or melancholy (Tasker & Negra, 2007), both within the mass media and academic spaces (Dean, 2010). Below are two extracts illustrating examples of participants who drew upon this discourse:

Extract 45

Helen

What is there that...would//...change..how much is left that can change/?

[...]

Rose

We were all for equality...and we got it [Laughs]...we can't really complain [Laughs].  
(Group 3).

Extract 46

Clara

Yeah..like there's no need for women to be so like striving for equality because we are equal now...so to sort of bring about the..erm..idea that we're oppressed it sort of goes against what society see is in general because we're not really oppressed anymore...so it's..it's {feminism} sort of like outdated..kind of thing.  
(Group 2).

This discourse views feminism as being a movement of the past which while necessary at the time (the 1960s and 1970s), is no longer relevant (Redfern & Aune, 2010). This can be seen in Clara's assertion that feminism is a "sort of like outdated..kind of thing". As noted by Gill and Scharff (2011), this discourse can

sometimes be drawn upon to mark out a time after 'seventies' feminist activism, against which contemporary feminist activism is judged. I would also suggest that in extract 46, there are echoes of McRobbie's (2009) double-entanglement - the notion of feminism being taken into account as being useful in the past, and then 'undone' as a movement which is redundant in contemporary Britain. This can be seen when Rose says: "We were all for equality...and we got it [Laughs]...we can't really complain".

Across the mini-focus group dataset, the 'war is won' discourse was deployed by participants in two ways. Firstly, it was deployed to suggest that feminism has 'been and gone'. Feminism was constructed by participants as being a movement which had relevance and currency in the past, but was seen as being no longer relevant to women's lives. For example, Claudia (Group 6) explained how when she hears the word 'feminism' she thinks of it in historical terms and not as something which is current: "I don't even think the last couple of years...I don't even think now...I think...I think decades ago//...that's what I think// when I hear the word". Secondly, participants deployed this discourse to suggest that feminism does not 'put itself out there' for the general public to access and engage with it, and this leads to a lack of awareness about feminism (both contemporary and historically) amongst both participants and the general public. This lack of awareness fed into participants' reluctance to identify with feminism. Many participants felt they could not claim the feminist label as they did not know enough about what feminism is or what feminists do. For example, Clara (Group 2) remarked how she does not know anything about feminism and would not know where to look to find information about it: "I wouldn't know where to look at all...if say..if you said to me..'Right...go and research feminism nowadays'...I wouldn't know".

### 7.3.2 *"It's been and gone"*

I will now first, explore the genealogy of this postfeminist discourse. The term 'postfeminism' first appeared in June 1919 in US-based women's periodical *Judy*. The term was used by women to indicate that they were interested in 'people' rather than in 'men and women', while placing emphasis on being pro-woman and pro-men at the same time. The term appeared again in the 1980s, via the

media declaring the 'death of feminism', implying feminism is now redundant and not required by society anymore as the 'fight for equality' has been 'won' (Faludi, 1993). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, mass media outlets such as newspapers proclaimed that feminism had 'done its job', men and women were 'now' equal and the 'gender war' was 'finally' over (e.g. Bellafante, 1998; Ward, 2003; Bunting, 2004; Dobson, 2007; and Woods, 2009). Politicians of the time, such as Margaret Thatcher (UK Prime Minister 1979-1990) proclaimed "The battle for women's rights has been largely won. [...] The days when they were demanded in strident tones should be gone forever" (as quoted in Faludi, 1993, p. 1). Faludi (1993) claims the mid-1980s was a period when a record number of young women were supporting feminist goals and adopting the feminist label, and yet it was also the period when "the media declared feminism was the flavour of the seventies and that 'post-feminism' was the new story – complete with a younger generation who supposedly reviled the women's movement" (as quoted in Faludi, 1993, p. 14). Though as Faludi (1993) points out, the first time postfeminist discourse began to be used by the press was not the 1980s, but in the 1920s (after the height of the women's suffrage movement), implying this is a discourse which appears periodically whenever women make progress towards equality. Similarly, to the late twentieth century, magazines in the 1920s 'informed' their readers that young women were no longer interested in engaging with feminism and that feminists were declining in numbers because 'their battle was over' (Faludi, 1993).

Research conducted by the Equal Opportunities Commission (2003) found that while male and female participants believed that equality and women's rights need to be promoted, they also considered terms such as 'feminism' and 'gender equality' to be old-fashioned. Griffin (2001) describes how feminism was often constructed in discussions through the late 1990s and early 2000s as being irrelevant to young women and how these constructions positioned 'young women' and 'feminism' as though they were separate and exclusive entities. Griffin argues that representing feminism as being exclusive and external to the subject of 'young woman' overlooks diversity among feminists. Griffin also simultaneously suggests that, while feminism is perhaps more diverse and contradictory in the early twenty-first century than it was during the 1960s-1980s, this does not mean that the perspectives of older feminists or their historical engagement with feminism have become irrelevant and old-fashioned. One

example of 'feminism as outdated and irrelevant' as cited by Griffin (2001) was a television interview on Channel 4 (*Booked*, 13 May 1998) with writer and 'self-declared' feminist Fay Weldon, who argued that young women (who were under-thirty, held professional qualifications and had no children) did not 'need' feminism and were also "having a great time" (as quoted in Griffin, 2001, p. 183). In this interview Weldon said "...but I do think the whole social landscape changes, the gender relationships change and you can't go on behaving as if it was 25 years ago" (*Booked*, Channel 4, May 1998, as quoted in Griffin, 2001, p. 183).

These comments by Weldon, thereby situate gender inequality as belonging in the past (specifically the mid-1970s), framing it as an anachronistic concept in the late 1990s, and therefore an issue which no longer holds currency, particularly with young women. The notion that feminism is an anachronistic concept in contemporary times can be observed in Claudia's (as seen below in extract 47) observation that to her, feminism is a movement which is associated with the past:

#### Extract 47

Claudia

It's a...it's a thing that you think of...I think...early to...to...the...last third//...of the 20<sup>th</sup> century..I think that's one major point..that's what you think of//...as..as..a historical..when..when you think..I think...suffragettes...round the war// time...and..and...and..and..the 70s...but...yeah..I don't..I don't..I don't think in the last couple of..I don't even think the last couple of years...I don't even think now...I think...I think decades ago//...that's what I think// when I hear the word.  
(Group 6).

It is clear here that Claudia constructs feminism as a historical movement that is strongly associated with specific time periods: "I think...suffragettes...round the war time...and..and...and..and..the 70s". Claudia appears to be referring here to particular periods of feminist activity (the suffragist movement and presumably the Women's Liberation movement) and periods marked by shifts in gender relations (it is possible that Claudia is referring to either the First World War, the Second World War or even both). In terms of power, what this discourse serves to do is distance feminism from the immediacy of women's lives today, and as noted by Griffin (2001), situates feminism's relevance and usefulness as being contained within the past and as not holding currency today. This discourse then



disempowers feminists by undermining their ability to challenge continuing disparities between women and men. This distancing is further cemented by Claudia claiming that when she hears the word 'feminism', she does not think of it as being a movement which has occupied the 'temporal space' of the last couple of decades: "I don't think in the last couple of...I don't even think the last couple of years...I don't even think now...I think...I think decades ago".

Griffin (2001) elucidates how discussions of young women's relationship with feminism, in the same way as discussions made about young people's lives in general, frequently rest on an 'us' (feminists) as distinct from 'them' (young women) binary. She argues that in this context, 'we' tend to be in the position of speaking 'for' and about young women in relation to feminism and suggests this is problematic. Griffin (2001) proposes that dialogue and debate around adulthood and youth needs to avoid constructing young people in patronising ways (e.g. as 'troubled') and to stop positioning youth as only associated with the future and adulthood as only associated with the past. Aronson (2003) argues such claims that young women are no longer interested in feminism have rarely been tested or backed up with empirical evidence. Redfern and Aune (2010) highlight how several surveys collecting data from teenage girls and young women (such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine's survey in 2006, WOMANKIND Worldwide's 2006 survey, and Girl Guiding UK's 2007 survey, among several others) showed that on average more than a quarter of young women labelled themselves as feminist. While the press report these findings as an indication of feminism's 'demise', McRobbie (2009) asserts that even in the 1970s, labelling oneself as a feminist was never something that was done by a majority of women, with only a small number adopting the label.

Over the last thirty years, mainstream media have constructed feminists as 'pitiable' women who cling to outdated ideas around gender, and who ignore 'evidence' that the world is now egalitarian and equal (Redfern & Aune, 2010). Redfern and Aune (2010) believe that this 'we're all equal now' narrative is one of the main reasons for young women not identifying with feminism. Indeed, the notion that 'we're all equal now' and that there are 'bigger things to worry about' than gender equality was apparent in my data, such as in Julia's comments (as seen in extract 48 below) which imply that the UK has 'moved on' from the days of gender inequality and gender is no longer a big issue or injustice:

#### Extract 48

Julia

I think..we have moved so far from where things were a hundred years ago//...I feel that there's maybe other things that...are..bigger injustices...ya know sort of// poverty in some areas of the world//..is a bigger injustice than...the..at least in our country...erm...women's roles...I don't think there is...a huge miscarriage of justice in the way that we//...can...go about our lives anymore...but I think..great leaps have been made in the last hundred years to bring us to this//...to this point.  
(Group 5).

As with Claudia's earlier comments, Julia locates feminism as being a movement which had currency in the past, but has no relevance today. Julia proposes that: "I don't think there is a...huge miscarriage of justice in the way that we...can...go about our lives anymore", suggesting that there has been great progress in relation to gender equality. In terms of power, this comment serves to elide the various issues that feminists such as Banyard (2010) claim that many women still face today (including objectification, sexual harassment, prostitution, and domestic violence to name but a few). Occluding the various issues women still face in the early twenty-first century serves the interests of those who wish to see the continuing of unequal gender relations. For example, the suggestion that men and women are now equal deflects attention away from the persistent equal pay gap.

Dean (2010) believes there is a growing collective sense that there is still significant work for feminism to do and that 'the battle has not been won' (p. 4). Indeed, the variety and range of different feminist organisations and activist groups<sup>21</sup> which are currently campaigning and working towards numerous goals would appear to support suggestions that there is still a need for feminist activism (Banyard, 2010). This could be argued to conflict with Julia's assertion that: "there's maybe other things that...are..bigger injustices" than gender inequality. It is also interesting how Julia gives the example of poverty as a 'bigger' injustice which elides how poverty tends to have a 'female face' with women (especially single mothers) being more likely than men to be living in poverty (Banyard, 2010). Comments such as this construct issues like poverty as being exclusive

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<sup>21</sup> Examples include, but not limited to: Reclaim the Night, Ladyfest, Object, UK Feminista, Feminist Fightback, the Million Women Rise march, London Feminist Network, Pink Stinks.

and separate to the issue of gender when issues such as these intersect. This discourse then serves to disempower feminists and undermine their work in drawing attention to the gendered nature of poverty. In terms of genealogy, Julia's assertion that: "there's maybe other things that...are..bigger injustices" also has echoes of left-wing political discourse in the 1960s and 1970s. Left-wing political groups at the time argued that by focusing on gender-specific issues was drawing resources and attention away from the 'main business' of a centralised attack on the ruling classes and those in power. For example, at the National Conference for a New Left Politics in 1967 in the US, women's issues were denied any political currency by the male speakers (Whelehan, 1995). According to Whelehan (1995), from this point there continued to be a common trend for political groups to advocate a Marxist-oriented approach focused on class consciousness in order to liberate both men and women. This however, can lead to feminism being 'tacked on' to monoliths such as Marxism and clumsily treated as a side-issue in academic disciplines.

Not only is women's rights denigrated as an irrelevant issue in contemporary Britain, there are comments made by participants which suggest feminism may still be relevant, but only in 'other' countries. This can be seen when Julia suggests that: "in some areas of the world//..is a bigger injustice than...the..at least in our country". What is particularly pertinent here is that while the relevancy of feminism is dismissed in relation to the British context, it is implied that women in other countries still need feminism. This suggestion that feminism is not needed by British women but is still needed by women abroad can also be seen in extract 49 below and will be explored in more detail:

#### Extract 49

Helen

Just isn't...and as we already said there doesn't seem to be a whole lot left..to..campaign with..relate to women's rights/.

Penny

/I think...I think there is still quite a lot..to go.

Helen

Unless we're campaigning for...women in other countries now...because for us...here in England//...we've not a massive amount left...abroad...there is//...but..what's a handful of women over here..campaigning..gonna do?

(Group 3).

In the discussion leading up to extract 49, Penny was describing an article she had found on the Internet about contemporary feminist activity. What followed was an interesting interaction between two participants in relation to the idea of modern feminists conducting campaigns. Here, the status of women's rights and equality in the UK is constructed as being in a position where there is very little left for feminism to campaign for. Helen's reference to quantity ("a handful") could be read as implying that not many women in the UK would be interested in campaigning for women in other countries. Again, this discourse serves to undermine the work of feminists campaigning for change in the lives of women on a global scale. This can be seen in the way the notion of women engaging in global campaigns is dismissed and constructed as a 'fruitless activity': "but what's a handful of women over here..campaigning..gonna do?" (Helen, Group 3).

Similarly, Scharff (2012) found instances in her own research of participants drawing on postfeminist discourse to suggest feminism is a spent force in the UK, while also implying that feminism is still needed in other cultures and parts of the world. Scharff suggested her participants were reiterating the trope of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' which reflects the tendency to think of Muslim women as being incomparably bound by the chains of patriarchal and religious oppression. Neither Helen, nor Julia directly referred to Muslim women or specified where the women they consider to be 'in need' are located. This remains vague throughout my dataset, but still bears similarities to Scharff's findings:

#### Extract 50

Tia

/I don't know..maybe they have a place in...in..in...countries where..women don't have...as..many rights..as men...maybe..not..here.

Holly

I think...our country's definitely...up to..not up to scratch but sort of//...up to a level..where...it's a lot more equal than//...where you look at other...countries who..haven't got as much as us//...you can see..more of a difference there...as where..I think..here and...sort of more wealthier countries..don't think it is...as well...it's not as easily seen is it...even if it is there..I don't think it's as easily...noticeable.

(Group 6).

Here again, are vague references to others “who haven’t got as much as us” (Holly). Holly’s comment here could imply that there is inequality in ‘less wealthy’ countries, it is possible Holly and Tia are referring to developing countries, but again which countries are deemed as being ‘in need’ of feminism remains vague. Scharff (2012) argues that this juxtaposition between the West ‘and the rest’ operates to disarticulate the need for feminism in countries such as Britain, as its dichotomous construction relies on characterising such countries as being liberated and free. What Scharff suggests the trope of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ does, is allow women (such as Helen, Julia, Tia and Holly) to reject feminism as irrelevant to their lives, while also providing women with a ‘face-saving’ device which enables them to portray themselves as supporters of gender equality.

### 7.3.3 *“I’ve not done anything to make myself a feminist, I’ve not taken an active role”*

According to Hercus (2005), whereas in the 1990s and 2000s feminists pondered the “I’m not a feminist but...” phenomenon, in the 1970s and 1980s they were more commonly discussing the ‘click’ phenomenon. Click refers to the moment when an individual first recognises the subordinate status of women, their own oppression and also the possibility of change. The ‘click’ tended to result from personal experiences and could be at times quite dramatic in its intensity. Hercus suggests that in the 1970s women were becoming more sensitive towards moments which confirmed their subordinate status (whether in the workplace or the home) as a result of increased media coverage at the time of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Hercus (2005) argues that while the ‘click’ concept resonates powerfully for many feminists as the pivotal moment in their becoming feminists, she considers that the concept is limited as an explanation of the transformation of ‘becoming feminist; and that consciousness, emotions, identity and action are all involved in this process. Hercus describes how in the 1970s, the ‘click’ for many women resulted from participating in consciousness-raising groups where women talked about their personal experiences and collectively discovered how their problems, rather than being solely personal in nature, had social and political causes. At the time it was generally assumed that both feminist identity and activism were the direct result of a woman’s consciousness

being raised to the point where she recognised not only her own oppression as a woman but also her common interests with other women (Hercus, 2005). In my research many of my participants declared the absence of any need for feminism in their lives, such as Holly (as seen in extract 51 below) who proclaimed that because she has never needed feminism before, she is never going to need it in the future:

Extract 51

Holly

I'll never go home...and research..what the word {feminism} actually means..cos it means nothing to me...and I don't...if I don't know it now..I don't need to know it...//I've got so far//...do you know what I mean..I'm not being...funny but...you know what I'm trying to say/?  
(Group 6).

Earlier in the discussion Holly stated that the term feminism does not mean anything to her and she does not know what it means. Here, she further qualifies this by asserting how she has: “got so far” without knowing what feminism is and presumably will continue to get by without ever knowing or needing to know. Redfern and Aune (2010) believe that feminism still holds an important place in Western society as on a personal level feminism can reassure women that they are not alone and the problems they experience are shared by other women and can prompt individuals to question the status quo. However, they stress feminism is not just about making individuals feel better; it is also about collective action, encouraging people to consider the wider impact of their actions and enables women to connect together problems and identify them as part of a wider pattern rather than as coincidences (Redfern and Aune, 2010). This linking together of ‘personal’ problems and wider social and political structures originally came about out of the consciousness-raising sessions held by second wave feminist groups in the 1960s. From here, the slogan ‘the personal is political’ was popularised, opening up what were once considered to be solely ‘private’ issues to political analysis and discussion (Whelehan, 1995). In contrast with this view, and in terms of power relations, many of the participants do not see gender discrimination or oppression as being features of their lives and therefore see feminism as holding no relevance to them. This can be seen here in Holly’s assertion that she doesn’t “need to know it {feminism}...//I’ve got so far” and when Julia states: “I honestly don’t feel that there are many barriers...to..my life as a woman” (Group 5). This could mean participants such as Holly and Julia did not

interpret any of their experiences as gender discrimination because they do not have access to any discourses (such as feminist ones) or frameworks of meaning which allow them to do so. This discourse then treats feminism as being personal and individual in nature and constitutes a covert exercise of power due to it eliding how feminist identification is based on more than simply making individuals feel better (Redfern & Aune, 2010), but rather that it is about having the desire to help improve and make other women's lives better. The way feminism is constructed by participants such as Holly and Julia is narrowed around the individual and their own needs, with no room for connections between women being made. Consistently, the consideration of distribution of power and control is absent in participants' speech, as well as the recognition of structural or institutional forms of power.

In contrast to the majority of participants who constructed the claiming of feminism in terms of how it can address the needs of an individual, Sandra constructs feminism differently:

Extract 52

Sandra

I think that..I dunno..I think it's not about what feminism can do for you..but what you can do for feminism...//that's how I see it...I don't think that it's about what feminism can offer people...I think we are feminism..and we do feminist stuff [...] yeah...make feminism what you want it to be...I dunno..get involved...do it..[laughs]...I dunno...yeah..I don't think that it's like..unions as well...people come to union when they want help...don't come to fucking feminism when you want help...don't fucking come to feminism when you've got a beef..like a fucking..build it yourself..build it locally/.

(Group 4).

While many of the participants did not claim a feminist subjectivity and viewed it as irrelevant to their lives, there was however, a minority of participants such as Sandra who identified with feminism. "I think it's not about what feminism can do for you..but what you can do for feminism". This could be read as Sandra making reference to a more individualised rhetoric of feminism as based on personal needs, and as countering this position by reframing feminism as being about what feminists do and how they can help people. Sandra later cements this view through drawing similarities between how people approach feminism and trade unions, implying that there are people who treat both of these as a service which they only turn to when they personally need help. This juxtaposes two different

ways of viewing feminism. One is as a form of service which can be accessed and used by individuals if they feel they need it. This treats feminism almost as a commodity which can be passively accessed and consumed by those who need it and is counter to how Sandra views feminism: "I don't think it's about what feminism can offer people". The other view treats feminism as something which is active and participatory. The focal point is on the individual getting involved, having an influence on the direction feminism can take: "make feminism what you want it to be", and appears to advocate a DIY ethos: "build it yourself..build it locally". Though, Sandra's comments could also be interpreted as drawing on postfeminist discourse when she implies that it can be moulded and shaped to how you want it to be: "make feminism what you want it to be". In this sense, Sandra's comments are suggesting women can fit feminism to their own personal desires and interests.

As I have noted earlier, many of my participants such as Holly and Julia did not see any injustice in their personal lives and in Julia's case did not perceive injustices as being gendered in nature: "women's roles...I don't think there is...a huge miscarriage of justice in the way that we//...can...go about our lives anymore". This lack of awareness of how gender inequality is still a problem today seems to chime with claims made by those who deploy postfeminist discourse to suggest gender equality is an issue which holds no currency in contemporary Britain (Weldon, 1998, as cited in Griffin, 2001). I feel this was particularly exemplified in Group 3's discussion when I asked participants if they felt there were any issues currently of concern to women. This was responded to with an extended period of silence, after which Helen eventually put forward: "I'm going to assume the silence means that we can't think of anything". This discourse then serves the needs of those in positions of power, as it deflects women's attention away from issues affecting women in this country and others. It renders issues as personal in nature, thereby depoliticising them. This then disempowers feminists who try to raise awareness of gender inequalities and campaign for change.

When it comes to claiming a feminist subjectivity, I identified accessibility, awareness and understanding as a potential issue (or even barrier) to this. Many of my participants expressed a lack of knowledge about what feminism is, who feminists are, and where to access information about feminism. This was



exemplified on occasions where I asked participants if they could name any feminists (both historical and contemporary). Many participants could not identify any feminists, one or two participants referred to Germaine Greer and Emmeline Pankhurst (who was 'merged' in one participant's account with Emily Wilding Davison), while (alarmingly) some participants 'identified' Margaret Thatcher and Katie Hopkins as feminists. Similarly, when probed for their awareness of feminist campaigns and activities, most participants showed little to no awareness of any activity with only SlutWalk and Everyday Sexism being referred to by one or two participants: "The closest thing to er...acknowledged outright feminism recently has been the 'Yes All Women' campaign" (Helen, Group 3). In the case of Everyday Sexism, Helen (as can be seen in extract 53 below) said that she was only aware of this campaign because she had stumbled across it on the Internet:

#### Extract 53

Helen

I don't know about you guys but I found most of this stuff on the Internet...//so// if people don't..or can't..because they don't have time or whatever...{to} just sit and trawl...and if you're not specifically looking for things..//it's not very often you stumble across it {feminism}.

(Group 3).

Whenever the issue of accessibility of feminism is discussed and analysed by feminists, it tends to be in relation to how intersectional it is and whether it is only focusing on white, middle-class women. I argue that accessibility in more practical terms (such as how feminism is signposted) needs more attention. Helen's comment that: "if people don't..or can't..because they don't have time or whatever" to surf the Internet to look for feminism highlights the fact that not everyone may be able to access the Internet (e.g. due to cost) or have the time to access it (e.g. because of long working hours and/or caring responsibilities). Viewing it in this way lends the issue of accessibility a classed reading with access to feminism being out of reach for those who are working-class or unemployed (and therefore cannot afford the Internet). Read another way, Helen's claim that: "it's not very often you stumble across it {feminism}", unless you: "just sit and trawl", constructs feminism as something arcane and difficult to access. Such comments also imply that accessing feminism requires people to be active on their part and already have an initial interest in finding it. This certainly chimes with Holly's comment from earlier that: "I'll never go home...and research..what the word {feminism} actually means..cos it means nothing to me"

(Group 5). Again, consciousness-raising, or rather the absence of it appears to play a role here. I would go further to suggest that what we are seeing here is a subject position I refer to as the 'unplugged girl'. The women taking up the subjectivity of the 'unplugged girl' are positioning themselves as politically apathetic and disengaged from both formal politics and social movements (such as feminism). In the early twenty-first century, concerns have been raised about young people's (and even more so young women's) lack of civic engagement, particularly in regards to politics. Young people's interest in current affairs, political parties, and government policy were considered in the 2000s as being in serious decline (Aapola, Gonick, and Harris, 2004). Harris (2004b) sets out how young women's disconnection from formal politics was not the only concern. There was also growing concern that young women were no longer engaged in organised social critique such as participation in social movements, activism, and protest. Selfishness, naïvety, and poor historical understanding has been attributed to women as underpinning their lack of political and civic engagement. Based on statements made by the women in the mini-focus groups, I would suggest that selfishness is perhaps too harsh a term to describe what is going on here. As I have already discussed, many of the women reduce feminist politics down to being a personalised form of self-help which a woman can turn to when in difficulty. This reminds me of the 'self-made girl' subjectivity which is a product of a discourse of individualisation which is running through late modern society (Bauman, 2002b; Harris, 2004b). Bauman (2002b) elucidates how people have been told and have come to believe that if someone fails to succeed in life (such as finding a job) than they only have themselves to blame. Likewise, Harris (2004b) describes how any barriers to citizenship faced by young women are reduced down to internal forces such as a girls' self-belief, self-esteem, and capacity to negotiate their life course. In order to become active citizens, women are required to negotiate life without support from the state.

Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2004) suggest that it is the shifting nature of citizenship (i.e. towards consumerism and the marketisation of the state) which has fundamentally altered the modes of political engagement made available to young women. Interest alone is not enough, capital in the form of knowledge and information (such as regarding different parties' political manifestos) are required for political citizenship. Feelings of disenfranchisement and lack of trust in politicians can also be factors here. For example, the women in Group 1 place

themselves in the subject position of 'non-voters' and suggest that they do not vote because they find it confusing, argumentative, and dishonest (Isabella: "Find it very boring"; Catherine: "I find it confusing"; Fay: "it'll just turn into a slanging match and then you just don't get anywhere...//like it..it's stupid...I just think...that if...you're in power...then..you do what you say that you're gonna do...cos most of the people don't."). Other participants claim a disconnection from politics, such as Sophie in Group 2 ("I don't understand politics enough to vote" [...] I think they're all alike [...] They all say things and then they..it never happens anyway"); Nika from Group 2 ("No, it's all ran [sic] by rich men (Laughs)"); and Helen in Group 3 ("I don't vote because I don't bother looking into policies..and I'm not voting..if I don't know what they're on about").

Another barrier to accessing feminism that I identified was in relation to visibility. This lack of visibility on the part of feminism was certainly apparent in the way the participants talked about their awareness of feminism. For example, Clara (as seen in extract 54 below) who expresses that she does not know how to go about researching feminism:

Extract 54

Interviewer

So do you find feminism not very accessible then in that...?

Clara

Yeah..I wouldn't..I wouldn't know where to look at all...if say..if you said to me..."Right...go and research feminism nowadays"..I wouldn't know..like who..like who leads feminist movements...like where to go and research it..I just wouldn't at all..'cause it's not put forward to me...like..I don't know anything about it/.  
(Group 2).

Clara's comments do seem to suggest that a lack of visibility leads to a lack of accessibility with regard to feminism. If people do not know where to find feminism (or what feminism is, or even what forms it takes) then they are unlikely to access it. Perhaps an issue here is that participants such as Clara do not know what the feminist movement looks like today: "I wouldn't know..like who..like who leads feminist movements". Indeed, this is supported by the participants' difficulties in identifying feminists (with only Emmeline Pankhurst and Germaine Greer being identified). As noted in chapter 2, postfeminist discourse operates to suggest that feminism is in decline or is already 'dead and gone'. The spectre of

the 'unplugged girl' emerges here as well. This unengaged and disconnected subjectivity so many of the women here seem to be adopting is concerning.

How feminism is defined is arguably crucial in understanding why young women choose not to label themselves as feminist and claim a feminist subjectivity. This narrow definition was observed across a number of discussions in my dataset such as can be seen in extract 56 below:

Extract 55

Interviewer

So would you label yourself a feminist or?/

[mu No].

Interviewer

No...why is that?

Zoe

Don't know enough about it to label myself or something.

Interviewer

Yeah

Catherine

I wouldn't know like what the criteria were..to say like I were a feminist or not.

Interviewer

Yeah...what about you Fay?

Fay

I don't..I just don't think that...unless you actively do something...that you can't label yourself as something...if that makes sense.

Interviewer

Do you feel like you have to do...do sommat to be a feminist?

Fay

Like I can't say I'm a feminist because I don't really pay that much attention to it..I don't do anything...//so...I wouldn't say I was.

(Group 1).

Here, feminism is quite clearly being constructed as something which requires an individual to be actively engaged with it. Participants such as Fay express discomfort at the idea of adopting a feminist subjectivity when they have not been involved in feminist activity: "I just don't think that...unless you actively do

something...that you can't label yourself as something". A similar expression of discomfort was made by Ashley:

Extract 56

Ashley

if I was to turn around to someone...and say "oh yeah well I'm a feminist"...and then they ask me something...and I just look at em and go..."I dunno"//...it's like...that..that's what I mean..that's why..that's why I just won't label myself..it's like I wouldn't...I wouldn't call myself an..an astronomer//...I know a bit about astronomy...but I..I c'nt call myself that..I'm not...if that makes sense.

(Group 7).

This discomfort that Ashley and Fay are expressing could be because if they call themselves feminist, they are potentially opening themselves up to accusations that they cannot legitimately claim the feminist label. This seems to accord with Hookaway's (2015) analysis of Australian blogs. Hookaway found that the concept of 'authenticity' was highly valued by bloggers. To the bloggers, authenticity meant:

*not* "being something I'm not" (Queen\_Extremist); *not* leading a false life" (Universal\_cloak); and *not* "inventing" yourself "as someone else". Like reality television contestants, their task is to sort the real from the fake, from those "playing the game" and those being themselves—to work out who's being "real" and who's not. (Hookaway, p. 1).

Hookaway (2015) notes how bloggers (such as Snifflethebouncer) impart in their writing that to them, feeling genuine about whatever they are doing is important. As James (2015) explains, the ideal of authenticity and being "true to yourself" (p.1) is now ubiquitous in Western culture. Similarly, Kanai (2015) defines authenticity as the quality of being consistently "true to oneself" and that the importance of this in online communities (such as social media networks) has increased as people have become more connected and subject to peer surveillance. Because of the importance of authenticity and being 'genuine', labels such as 'fake', 'poseur', and 'wannabe' become slurs to be avoided. It could be that being labelled as a 'fake' is something which Ashley is seeking to avoid by not claiming a feminist subjectivity: "if I was to turn around to someone...and say "oh yeah well I'm a feminist"...and then they ask me something...and I just look at em and go..."I dunno"".

What also appears to be happening in these extracts is that the discourse is constructing feminists as people who 'do' things which implies that 'simply' holding feminist views is not enough for someone to adopt a feminist subjectivity:

Extract 57

Mel

I feel like I haven't..I've not done anything to make myself a feminist..I've not taken an active role...I've not..I haven't..you know..done anything to the feminist movement or...but I believe in women's rights and I'm sure some of the ideals of feminism.

(Group 2).

The implication of this is that if only people who 'do' things can be feminists, this could exclude a large number of people who hold feminist views but are not involved in feminist activity (such as campaigning for women's rights or participating in protests). This seems to chime with Redfern and Aune's (2010) suggestion that those who do not claim the label are using a narrow definition of feminism, one which defines feminists as activists who go on marches and attend protest rallies. Not actively engaging with feminism seems to render the subjectivity of feminist unclaimable to some women such as Mel: "I've not done anything to make myself a feminist..I've not taken an active role". Redfern and Aune (2010) speculate that this narrow definition may lead some young women to believe that only 'active' feminists have the right to use the feminist label and therefore not view themselves as feminists despite holding feminist opinions or reproducing feminist discourse.

Extract 58

Ashley

I would never feel comfortable...labelling myself as that...because I've not engaged with it as much as//...as I could..I suppose//...I don't know..I don't enough about..sort of the history...and I don't really know enough about what's going off now.

(Group 7).

Again, knowledge of feminism presents itself as an issue. Ashley expresses reluctance to adopt a feminist subjectivity because she feels she does not know enough about feminist history, nor current feminist activity. This along with comments such as Catherine's that "I wouldn't know like what the criteria were..to say like I were a feminist or not" arguably frame feminism as a movement which requires knowledge in order to gain 'membership'. What this then means is that

feminism could be viewed to be a movement that is not accessible to the average person. If the general public view knowledge as an essential prerequisite for engagement with feminism then this could potentially put people off from trying to engage with it. A further point here is how the subjectivity of feminist is construed as being formed by a particular set of requirements or criteria which need to be met in order to adopt this subject position. This almost evokes the 'good feminist' discourse present in the blog data which suggests feminists should behave and act in certain ways. What this discourse does then, is to suggest that feminists do and must act in the same way, implying feminism is a monolithic entity, as opposed to a movement based on openness to new ideas, flexibility and a collaborative ethos.

#### **7.4 Summary of chapter and final remarks**

Across the mini-focus group dataset I identified a postfeminist discourse that constructed feminism as irrelevant, inaccessible and located in the past. I have shown how participants deployed this discourse in two key ways. Firstly, participants deployed this discourse to suggest that feminism has 'been and gone' and is strictly located in the past. I noted how participants did not view issues and injustices such as poverty through a gendered lens and instead constructed these as being outside the remit of feminism. I also noted how some participants 'othered' women from other countries by drawing on the trope of the 'oppressed non-Western woman' to assert that feminism is only relevant and needed in non-Western countries.

Secondly, participants deployed this discourse to express their lack of understanding of what feminism is now, what being a feminist constitutes and thereby felt unable to adopt a feminist subjectivity. I noted how feminism's perceived lack of visibility renders it less accessible as participants appeared to lack the knowledge and/or ability to 'find' feminism and research it. There does appear to be an issue tied in here with young women (such as the participants in Study 3) possibly feeling that they do not have the 'right' to legitimately claim the feminist label because they are not knowledgeable, committed or engaged enough.

## **CHAPTER 8 - STUDY 3: 'KEEP CALM AND STAY NEUTRAL'. YOUNG WOMEN'S CO-CONSTRUCTIONS AROUND GENDER AND FEMINISM**

### **8.1 Introduction**

#### *8.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The purpose of this chapter is to continue discussion of Study 3. In the previous chapter I presented the first discourse identified as operating across the mini-focus group dataset: "What is feminism for? The war is won": a postfeminist discourse of feminism as irrelevant, inaccessible and situated in the past. While this was a discourse which located feminism as being in the past, the remainder two discourses ("Sisters are looking out for themselves": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility and the 'can-do girl'; and "We want 'equalityism', not feminism": a postfeminist discourse of gender neutrality as constituted by backlash notions such as 'what about teh menz?') share with each other a common core of gender neutrality, albeit manifested in two different ways. This core of gender neutrality will be discussed in this chapter as I now shift focus to the second and third discourses.

### **8.2 "Sisters are looking out for themselves": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility and the 'can-do girl'**

#### *8.2.1 Introduction*

The second discursive pattern identified as operating across the mini-focus group dataset was postfeminism as constituted by individualist notions of 'personal choice', 'individualised responsibility' and the 'can-do girl'. This is a discourse which I identified in the magazine data (see chapter 5) and the blog data (see chapter 6) as well:



#### Extract 59

Tia

It's..dog-eat-dog..and dog-eat-your-supper//...because...no one's gonna look after you if you can't look after //yourself.

(Group 6).

Individualist discourse asserts that it is up to the individual to make their own choices in how they live and work (Bauman, 2002b). This discourse centres around the idea that the individual is personally responsible for the course of their life, while external constraints (such as social and political context), influences and pressures are either not acknowledged or are dismissed altogether (Harris, 2004b). This rhetoric of an individual being responsible for their own life is echoed in Tia's assertion that women have to look after themselves: "it's dog-eat-dog [...] because...no one's gonna look after you". The notion of women being self-sufficient is invoked in juxtaposition with feminism by participants such as Sophie:

#### Extract 60

Sophie

When..as soon as you learn about it {feminism} you think it's the same as what it was in history and everyone's a raging feminist and that everyone should be..like..everyone's really passionate about it...whereas most people aren't..most people just sort of get on with it..[laughs].

(Group 2).

It is perhaps unsurprising that this discourse should be so dominant in the dataset, and so I will now delve into the genealogy of this discourse. Sociologists Furlong and Cartmel (1997) describe how young people in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have been growing up in a different world to the one experienced by previous generations. The era previous generations experienced in the early to mid-twentieth century, referred to as 'industrial modernity', was characterised by the following: a strong centralised government; a system of industrial capitalism built upon manufacturing; the development of liberal welfare states and social justice movements; and enduring social ties, centred round a shared identity based upon class, community and place. In contrast, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, referred to as 'late modernity' is characterised by: complex, global capitalist economies; deindustrialisation; an expansion of communications, technology and service-based industries; and a movement from state support and welfare to an emphasis on privatised services.

Gill and Scharff (2011) suggest that individualist discourse has intensified and penetrated ever more deeply over time, with individuals being increasingly called upon to self-manage (Sophie: “most people just sort of get on with it”) and make sense of their individual biographies (in terms of freedom, autonomy and choice), regardless of how much constraint may be present in their lives.

In 1990, political scientist Ronald Inglehart (as cited in Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001) suggested that in late modernity an intergenerational shift in values was taking place. He proposed that in comparison to previous generations young people were less concerned with materialist values (which emphasise tradition, security, and material comfort) and were more concerned with non-materialist values (which stress the importance of personal freedom and quality of life). Some of my participants expressed concerns about the shift in focus from the family to social media:

Extract 61

Tia

/Now that whole thing of like that whole..er...family dynamic..I think..that's breaking down as well//...whereas before..it was all about the family...and..now..it's not..it's about...ya know..your friend on Facebook or//...ya know...your frie..your friend that you've never actually //seen in real life.

(Group 6).

Beck (1992) refers to this late modern period as a ‘risk society’ where economic insecurity and global insecurities are combined with the breaking down of identities and collective ties along with an increasing sense of a loss of significant connections with others felt by individuals. Participants such as Tia and Holly suggest ties such as those of family are no longer around: “And there’s not as much family support as there used to...there isn’t” (Group 6). Others talk about individuals concentrating on their own personal lives: “Everyone else just kinda going about their life” (Nina, Group 7), or keeping themselves to themselves: “Yeah..just crack on..and stop worrying about what other people are doing and thinking...and just...crack on with it” (Gwen, Group 7).

Individualist notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility, and self-sufficiency cut across the mini-focus group discussion and this discourse was deployed by participants in two different ways. Firstly, it was often deployed to

suggest that equality is achievable through individualised and personal actions (e.g. a woman working their way up in a business) rather than through collective actions (e.g. protests or marches). For example, Julia (Group 5) who suggested that rather than campaigning for writers to create more female-centric television shows, individuals should write the shows they want to see: “it’s sort of like if I wanted there to be...I mean I’m not a writer..but ya know sort of like..maybe I should be the one who writes a..a kids’ TV series”. Secondly, participants deployed this discourse to present the concept of personal choice as being paramount and placed women’s choices in a position of being beyond critique and judgement. This discourse was frequently deployed to criticise those (in particular feminists) who judged choices made by women (such as in relation to choosing to be a stay-at-home mum over having a career, or in relation to women choosing to wear make-up). For example, Gwen (Group 7) who makes reference to feminists who judge women for adopting beauty practices such as trimming their eyebrows: “oh..you’re not a proper feminist..you...wear lipstick..you paint your nails..you clip your eyebrows’...so fucking what...[laughing]..like..does that actually matter?” Both of these ways of deploying the discourse will be examined in turn below.

### 8.2.2 *“If things are going to change it’s got to start with me”*

Gill and Scharff (2011) express how they have observed that in the late modern era, the landscape of gender relations is marked by contradictions. In particular, they note that discourses of ‘girl power’, ‘top girls’ (McRobbie, 2007) and ‘can do girls’ (Harris, 2004b) are coexisting with the development of new forms and modalities of power, and also a resurgence in inequalities. The image of the young, educated, professional career woman with a glamorous consumer lifestyle can be seen displayed across media from magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire* to films and television shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* (McRobbie, 2004). Harris (2004b) argues that while only a minority of women are able to adopt the ‘career woman’ subject position, the image functions as a powerful ideal suggesting not only that *all* young women are enjoying this kind of lifestyle, but that this is what it means to be a successful woman. This image appears to be invoked by Clara (in extract 62 below), who

discusses how she feels under pressure to adopt the subject position of the 'independent can-do girl':

Extract 62

Clara

I feel like I'm meant to act independent..like if a boy offered for you..I'd be like..'No, how dare you..like..offer to pay for me...I'm independent..I can pay for my own food'...And I feel like I'm under pressure to act like that...like I'm expected as a wom..as a modern day..21<sup>st</sup> century woman.. to be independent..and almost be offended that a man would think that I need any sort of help..whether it be financial.  
(Group 2).

As noted by Harris (2004b), 'can-do girls' are construed as the ideal late modern subject and are constructed as being flexible, individualised, resilient, self-driven and self-made. It is this latter construction which appears to be predominant in Clara's comments: "I can pay for my own food", and "like I'm expected [...] to [...] be offended that a man would think that I need any sort of help..whether it be financial". In late modernity, a glamorous career, a luxurious consumer lifestyle and financial independence are all considered to be markers of success for the 'can-do girl'. Successful and independent young women are constituted as an all-powerful market, in terms of their own purchasing power (Harris, 2004b). Young women are incited to display their success through consumption and this is apparent in Clara's comments. The way Clara discusses this appears to suggest that she is aware of this incitement to be an independent, self-made subject who does not need help or support. Indeed, Clara discusses this in terms of performativity, in that she feels she needs to display her independence in financial-related situations such as paying a restaurant bill, implied by her comment: "I can pay for my own food" and her two references to men offering to pay for her. Also of interest was how, when Clara was discussing how there is an expectation placed on her as a woman to perform this behaviour, corrected herself: "I'm expected as a wom..as a modern day..21<sup>st</sup> century woman.. to be independent" suggesting that Clara is perhaps making reference to this being an expectation placed on women now, that was not there for previous generations. The multiple references to men in this context adds a gendered emphasis to this whereby it is suggested that 'modern girls' are 'supposed' to be independent, income-generating and not rely on men for financial support.

One key social feature of the postfeminist sensibility (as informed by individualisation) is a new emphasis on individual responsibility and competitive individualism, through which women are encouraged to make the best of the opportunities available and manage their own lives with little to no intervention by the state (Harris, 2004b). According to Harris (2004b), young women who do not live up to this image of success are branded as 'failures', as 'at-risk' and their lack of success is attributed to them making poor choices or not putting in sufficient effort, as well as blame being placed on 'irresponsible families', 'lazy communities' and 'bad neighbourhoods'. It could be that participants such as Clara who invoke the subject position of the 'can-do girl' feel 'under pressure' to adopt this position and display their success, as to do otherwise, risks them being labelled as 'failures' and judged as having 'not made the effort' to be successful and income-generating in their own right. In terms of power, this discourse is arguably problematic as barriers relating to the socioeconomic context, such as a changed labour market which is increasingly dependent on the use (and arguably exploitation of) young women in casual/temporary, low-paid and low-status jobs, are not acknowledged and instead are ascribed as being only pertinent to a small minority of women (Harris, 2004b). A further problem is that the 'can-do girl' subjectivity is closely tied into the ability to consume (which of course requires the individual to also be income-generating) and as pointed out by feminist researchers is distinctly middle-classed in nature (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Scharff, 2014) and so can be difficult to achieve for those women who fall outside of this category. This discourse then serves the interests of employers as it encourages women to become income-generating and thereby incites them to become keen and diligent employees. It also serves the interests of capitalism as this discourse construes success with individual spending-power and incites women to demonstrate this through the consumption of goods.

Many of the participants expressed their aspirations and desires in relation to pursuing careers, particularly those who were in their early twenties or younger and attending university which is reflective of Blackmore (2001) and Harris's (2004b) comments that middle-class young women have been provided with both the skills and desire to embrace employment opportunities created in the late modern economy. When participants were discussing careers, individualisation narratives became apparent in relation to this, such as in Anna's comments (below in extract 63) which suggest that gender equality will be achieved by

women taking particular steps (such as studying at university, establishing themselves in a particular career and working their 'way up' into the higher echelons of their workplace):

Extract 63

Anna

Rather than saying...I'm a feminist...doing something...like going to uni...going and getting a job...and working your way up and..being a..high position..if more women...have that drive to do something..and...like make it more equal...then it will...like that's what needs to be done.

(Group 1).

Participants such as Anna appear to be taking on the subject position of the 'can-do girl'. 'Can-do girls' are noted for their high ambitions in relation to employment and tend to engage in elaborate planning for their careers construing them as ideal citizens (and as ideal subjects of late modernity). 'Can-do girls' are incited through discourse to seize opportunities and make projects of their work selves from a young age (Harris, 2004b). Anna appears to be invoking this when she comments that it is important for individual women to have a "drive to do something" in order to achieve gender equality, though this something does not materialise as a call for collective action or political campaigning. Rather, Anna appears to be drawing on notions of the 'new meritocracy'. In terms of genealogy, McRobbie (2007) describes the 'new meritocracy' as having its roots in the New Labour government (1997-2010). Here, New Labour built their campaign based upon the prospect of a bright future in the 'new economy' for the UK. In this new meritocracy, gender-based barriers to education and employment were perceived to have been 'stripped away', allowing young women to rise quickly to 'the top' in their chosen career. This emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for themselves and 'working their way up' leads to a 'suspicious attitude' towards those women who are not successful, with them being perceived as not having made 'the effort'. Again, this discourse represents a covert exercise of power in the way it occludes structural barriers faced by women in trying to navigate their life course. As Bauman (2002b) discusses, in late modernity people are subject to market forces and are unaware of them and therefore unable to anticipate them. Individuals are exhorted to come up with their own biographical solutions and individualist rhetoric diverts attention away from the consideration of collective solutions. Bauman explains how individualist rhetoric implies that the way society works has been settled conclusively and is therefore unchangeable,

and it is instead individuals who can change. Participants such as Anna do appear to be invoking this notion that it is individual solutions which can bring about change, and not solutions based at a societal level.

It is interesting that Anna juxtaposes her advocacy for self-responsibility with feminism. Anna asserts that women taking self-responsibility for their careers is “what needs to be done”, while possibly implying that feminism is, conversely, not what is needed to achieve gender equality. Here, feminism is undermined through it being constructed merely in terms of identification (‘I’m a feminist’), but not in terms of activism, campaigning or any other active behaviour. There is no acknowledgement made of the kind of work feminists can do (and are doing) in relation to gender equality in the workplace. What this does is disempower feminism by rendering it as passive and not practical in nature, and thereby not being in the position to achieve anything (such as gender equality). This discourse then constructs feminism as a movement which young women do not wish to identify with, while the alternative presented here (individual women working their ‘way up’) is constructed as active and therefore desirable. Such comments could also be argued to be classed in nature with a narrow focus on careers and education when discussing gender issues. This is reflective of the shift towards individualisation with its new emphasis on self-responsibility and competitive individualism, through which people are encouraged to make the best of the opportunities available and manage their own lives with little to no intervention by the state (Bauman, 2002a, 2002b; Harris, 2004b) or even social movements such as feminism. Nikolas Rose (1992) understands this process as governmentality. Here, government denotes various ways in which the self has become linked to power, with power being understood by those working in the Foucauldian tradition (such as Rose) as working through and not against subjectivity. Government, according to Rose has always been concerned with ensuring their authority is internalised in citizens, via inspiring, inaugurating and encouraging techniques, methods and programmes which will autonomise and responsabilise their subjects. Rose outlines how processes of individualisation are linked to a shifting relationship between the state and its citizens. Rose (1992) stresses that government does not seek to govern through society, but through the regulated choices made by individual citizens. In other words, power working through individuals who are not simply its subjects, but who are construed as actively participating in its operations.

Some sociologists perceive the process of individualisation as one which promises freedom, autonomy and choice, as well as creating opportunities for individuals to develop their life trajectories independently of the traditional ties which helped provide previous generations with a sense of 'their place' in society (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). For example, Miles (2000, as cited in Harris, 2004b) proposed that such a risk society generates a subjectivity, the image of which is of increased independence, self-realisation and self-determination. Miles refers to these as positive developments, though acknowledges that these take place in an arguably less secure world. This celebration of increasing freedom and independence from tradition has been criticised by feminists who argue that these new opportunities only exist within certain circumstances and remain highly constrained for the majority of people (Harris, 2004b; Scharff, 2012).

In the early twenty-first century, it is young women who are imagined as being the ideal late modern subject (Harris, 2004b; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Scharff, 2014). Feminist research has identified that it is young women who are held up as being the group most able to adapt to and succeed in late modernity and thereby are positioned as the group most able to identify on the behalf of contemporary society the 'best way forward' (Harris, 2004b). Harris (2004b) argues that young women are being constructed as the front line of a new subjectivity and believes there are two key reasons why it is young women, rather than young people in general who are being invested in. Firstly, the change in economic and work conditions have coincided with the successful campaigning of the women's movement leading to greater opportunities for women in employment and education. Secondly, discourse around individual responsibility and personal choice dovetail with broad feminist notions around opportunities for young women, thereby making young women the likely candidates for performing this new self-made subjectivity. However, Scharff (2014) argues that there are stark contradictions between this hopeful positioning of young women as subjects of capacity and the increase in intensifying forms of governmentality and scrutiny.

The change in socioeconomic conditions and the requirement for individuals to take control of their lives without support has generated anxiety about the future of young people in this late modern period (Harris 2004b). According to Harris



(2004b), it is young people who are counted upon to make their way towards an unpredictable future and even flourish, as it is the young who are believed to be most capable of surviving in this climate (of changing work conditions) having grown up in an unpredictable risk society. What is interesting here is that genealogy shows how this concern and anxiety for young people carving out their futures is not a new phenomenon. Lesko (2001), in her study of adolescence at the end of the nineteenth century, proposed that a new political and civic order was being developed at the time in both the United Kingdom and the United States in part due to it being a period concerned with nationalism. This led to a preoccupation with the attitudes, behaviour and development of adolescents, with agencies such as education focused on monitoring and aiding young people's moral and social development, in order to produce rational, productive and patriotic citizens. This attention paid to young people was underpinned by the prospect of securing the future of the nation if education 'got it right'. According to Lesko, young people at the time were incited to personify and model civic values (e.g. strength, sacrifice, and responsibility). At the time young people were constructed as highly dependent and were required to take their guidance from experts and authority in order to become citizens. The characteristics of the ideal young person was clearly prescribed as part of a larger social plan for national homogeneity (Harris, 2004b).

Again, to look at this discourse through the dimension of genealogy, Harris (2004b) suggests that the kind of attention which was focused on young people at the end of the nineteenth century has re-emerged in the early twenty-first century, though this time with a particular focus on young women. She argues that the scrutiny and regulation of young women and girlhood serve many of the same purposes in a contemporary context including the creation of social order and citizenship. Similarly to the adolescents of the late nineteenth century, Harris (2004b) believes that young women today are held simultaneously to represent possibilities and anxieties about an uncertain future. Not only are young women perceived as those best able to handle and succeed in the current socioeconomic order, but young women are themselves encouraged to envisage themselves in this way. What is different between these two contexts is that while in the late nineteenth century adolescents were disciplined and monitored under close and direct supervision by the state and its agencies, in late modernity this has been replaced by self-governance. In late modern times, power has been

devolved onto individuals who are incited to regulate themselves through making the 'right' choices, as well as manage their own development by being self-inventing, responsible citizens who do not need to rely on the state for support (Rose, 1992; Harris, 2004b). In contrast with their nineteenth century counterparts, the ideal young person today is expected to be a unique, successful individual who is autonomous and makes their own choices and plans. Where before, adolescents were overtly monitored and directed, young people today are shaped through perpetual everyday observation and are also elicited to self-monitor and manage their life trajectories as part of their personal 'reflexive biographical project'. Young people in late modernity are also encouraged to exhibit this biography in order to be scrutinised by experts and observers such as through jobseeker diaries. Yet despite this scrutiny, the obligation for young people to work on becoming 'unique individuals' is constructed through individualist discourse as being a freedom which is displayed through personal choices and 'projects of the self' (Harris, 2004b).

While this discourse is presented on the surface as empowering for women, it constrains 'ways of being' for women by exhorting women to work on themselves and be successful. As noted earlier, this tends to be framed in terms of career and professional development leading to individual spending-power, and does not allow space for other 'ways of being' such as volunteering or choosing to be a stay-at-home mother (as these in themselves do not lead to greater spending-power). Women are called to attend to the images of 'endless possibilities' for consumption promulgated by Western popular culture. This discourse emboldens young women to believe that successful transformation, improvement and even perfection is possible for *all*, so long as one works hard enough and makes the 'right' choices (Press, 2011b). This perception that young women are the ones who are best able to handle and carve 'the way forward' for society is illustrated in Julia's discussion (in extract 64 below) of improving representation of girls in television shows:

#### Extract 64

Julia

But I think again...campaigning for people to do stuff...is different from...really what..a lot of the time..I think if things are going to change..it's

got to start with me//...//and so...it's sort of like..if I wanted there to be...I mean I'm not a writer..but ya know sort of like..maybe I should be the one who writes a..a kids' TV series that has...erm...ya know sort of..a Super Chloe<sup>22</sup> who//...ya know sort of..is the one who...saves the day and..is that...has ya know the powers that do..but ya know...it's trying to..it's hard to campaign for other people to do your ideas for you...//like I said it's one thing campaigning to..a government to do something but/.

(Group 5).

In Julia's comments, campaigning for causes (such as feminism) is afforded a lower status than individualist solutions (such as individual women taking it upon themselves to create the kind of media they want to see) and this could be interpreted as belittling the work activists do in campaigning for better representations of women in media (such as films and television shows). Here, individualist solutions are constructed as being active in nature with the suggestion that it would be more effective for an individual to make changes themselves (such as writing female-centric television shows) than it is to campaign for other people (such as television writers) to make the desired changes. What this does is suggest that campaigning is ineffective as it is the responsibility of the individual to make changes in society (due to them having the idea to make the change in the first place) and in turn this leaves no space for collective action or resolutions within the public sphere such as through legislative change. This reflects Redfern and Aune's (2010) argument that British culture's focus on the individual as the primary social unit can obstruct young women from supporting feminism (which is arguably focused on collective gain). Individualism, they contend, encourages women to demonstrate how 'successful' and 'empowered' they are through dissociating themselves from feminism. This discourse then undermines the work of feminists and renders it an undesirable subjectivity to adopt. This discourse also serves the interests of those who wish to maintain gender inequalities. For example, this discourse diverts responsibility away from television writers and producers to improve representation of female characters in television shows. Again, while this discourse appears to be empowering for women by suggesting they take writing female-centric television shows into their own hands, it obscures how difficult it is for an individual to enter professions such as script-writing and glosses over other factors which can be

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<sup>22</sup> Julia is making a reference here to her daughter. Chloe is a pseudonym provided to protect her daughter's anonymity.

difficult to overcome (such as getting funding to produce a television show, and persuading a television channel to commission and air a program).

A 'girl power' rhetoric of empowerment puts forward the notion that all young women have the potential to change the world (Banet-Weiser, 2015) which I would argue is apparent in Julia's assertion that: "if things are going to change..it's got to start with me". Scharff (2014, 2015) found in her interview study with young, female workers (based in the classical music industry), that women who took on the position of the entrepreneurial subject related to themselves as if they were a business. They actively worked on the self, adopted a positive attitude, hid failures, and embraced both risks and knockbacks. Again this is a discourse which is underpinned by the idea that everyone has the potential to succeed in life, *if* they try hard enough, and in this particular case, the act of writing for television is presented as something *anyone* can do and should do if they want to see change. According to this discourse, those who cannot succeed through their own efforts are looked down upon as individual failures and no account is made of the fact that everyone in life starts from different places and can face varying levels of opportunities and barriers (dependent on factors such as economics, class, ethnicity, and ability/disability) (Redfern & Aune, 2010). Both Julia and Anna's construction of individual solutions as being active and therefore desirable, are contrasted with a passive construction of feminism and activism which are rendered undesirable. What such constructions do is 'undo' feminism and discourage women from claiming a feminist subjectivity (Scharff, 2012). As McRobbie (2009) notes, for young women, being able to adopt an able and independent subjectivity comes at the cost of having to give up and renounce feminist politics.

### 8.2.3 *"It bothers me when women are judging each other's choices"*

One key feature of this discourse which was re-occurring throughout the dataset was that of choice. Harris (2004b) describes how women now have greater freedom of choice in relation to their bodies, family and relationships (e.g. the right to have an abortion). Harris suggests that these changes have enabled a generation of young women to view themselves as enjoying new freedoms and opportunities, able to pursue lifestyles independent of family, men and the state.

This current generation of young women have been brought up to believe that “girls can do anything” and “girls are powerful” (p. 8). This discourse promises women that they are already empowered, and that freedom is within reach should they choose to claim it. It also (both overtly and covertly) operates to suggest that equality has already been achieved and a woman’s future lies solely in her hands (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015).

The concepts of choice and freedom are central to individualist discourse, as in late modernity individuals are incited to be flexible, resilient and responsible for managing their own lives. An individual’s own life becomes worked on much like a personal Do-It-Yourself [DIY] project of the self or a ‘choice biography’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Kelly, 2000). The choice biography can be developed by an individual in any shape they desire, rather than it having to follow a traditional and fixed set of life stages (as it would have for previous generations) (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Harris (2004b) argues that young women are doubly constructed as the ideal flexible subject because these features of postfeminist discourse incorporate key elements of feminist principles around empowerment, opportunities for choice, personal responsibility and the ability of young women to: “be what you want to be” (p. 8). In the extract below, emphasis is placed on having freedom to do what you want:

Extract 65

Tara

Doing whatever you like doing..is important to me...erm...it’s like...everybody likes different things..but as long as you’re comfortable with...what you like doing.  
(Group 5).

The notion of choice is a dominant feature of postfeminism. This notion is drawn upon by many participants in the mini-focus groups. For example, comments such as Tara’s: “as long as you’re comfortable with...what you like doing” reoccurs across the dataset. For example Nina states: “I think at the end of the day if you’re genuinely happy...with..whatever you’re doing [...] Doing whatever makes you happy then...it’s fine..cos at the end of the day that’s all we have to do isn’t it?” (Group 7).

In terms of genealogy, the rhetoric of choice has its roots in second wave feminism. This was primarily in relation to reproductive rights and the notion of ‘a

woman's right to choose'. Men's continued dominance in positions of power meant women's decision-making capacity in relation to fertility and reproduction was still constrained. Women's reproductive choices (such as in terms of contraception, family planning, access to affordable childcare, and abortion) were also restricted by access to financial resources. A 'woman's right to choose' is based on the claim that women (and not male politicians, doctors, lawyers and religious leaders) should be free to decide what to do or not do with their bodies. By extension, women should also free to choose how and where they give birth (Bryson, 1999; Murphy, 2015). Liberal feminists see reproductive freedom as an extension of the basic liberal principle that individuals are free to do what they want with their own bodies, and are free to live their lives as they wish, free from state intervention. To deny reproductive choice is seen by liberal feminists as a violation of a woman's right to freedom and privacy. Liberal principles were also used to claim that 'a woman's right to choose' is a necessary precondition for autonomy and self-determination, and therefore required if a woman is to act as a citizen and compete in the labour market on an equal footing with men (Bryson, 1999). Murphy (2015) observes how there has been a shift in how the concept of choice is construed. Under second wave feminism choice was framed in collective terms, but now choice is framed in individual terms and has been extended from being focused upon reproductive rights to everyday aspects of an individual's lifestyle. Some feminists (e.g. Murphy, 2015; Mackay, 2015) have observed how modern rhetoric around individual choice is intertwined with postfeminism and third wave feminism.

Third wave feminism is a complex term which has been generally identified as a 'new' version of feminism which emerged in the early 1990s. Kiraly and Tyler (2015) hold that third wave feminism has been primarily shaped by liberal feminism. Third wave feminism often intertwines with postfeminism with some authors and activists using the terms interchangeably, along with 'new feminism', 'choice feminism', 'consumer feminism', 'free market feminism', 'popular feminism', 'fun feminism', and 'feminism-lite' (e.g. McRobbie, 2000; Kiraly & Tyler, 2015; Mackay, 2015). As Mackay (2015) found in her own research on feminist activists, third wave feminism is often conflated with choice feminism, with the two being viewed as synonymous, and Mackay found similar connections made between third wave ideology, postfeminism and neoliberalism. Third wave feminism positions itself as a wave of feminism which seeks to distance itself

from second-wave feminism and demonstrate that it has 'moved on' (Press, 2011b). Third wave feminists generally situate themselves as being outside 'the academy' and as distinct from the 'second wave' in their approaches and methods (Kelly, 2005). Rowe-Finkbeiner (2003, as cited in Kelly, 2005) sums up 'third wave' feminism as combining previous efforts of the 'first' and 'second waves' and modifying this with "a woman's right to choose what works best for her" (as quoted in Kelly, 2005, p. 234).

Emphasis is made by participants on the importance of people not just doing what they want to do, but that they are doing what they are happy to do or are "comfortable with" (Tara). In such talk, participants expressed it was important for people to not feel pressured to do things they do not want to, or not do things because they "think you shouldn't" (Gwen, Group 7). This third wave rhetoric of choice is similar to discourse where the individualised subject is contended as being 'free' to determine their own identity and life trajectory without external influence (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Press, 2011b). This notion of women being able to 'be what they want to be' and choosing what works best for them can be seen in Alice's (in extract 66 below) observation that women 'judging' other women makes her feel uncomfortable:

#### Extract 66

Alice

Another thing that..bothers me is like when..women are judging each other...because like...erm...like judging each other's choices like when one woman says.."I have a career..and that makes me better than this woman...who is a stay-at-home mum"//...or ya know the stay-at-home mum going.."well I'm raising children...so erm...//that makes me better than..women who go out to work" [...] and...ya know the...there are women who are living lifestyles that...I personally don't agree with...but...if it makes them happy than I...I shouldn't really judge them.  
(Group 5).

Those who draw upon choice feminist discourse advocate that women have the right to determine their lives and all choices are accepted as valid (Ferguson, 2010). This is apparent when Alice states how even if she does not agree with another woman's lifestyle she "shouldn't really judge them". Ferguson (2010) considers that such discourse places feminists in a bind and disempowers them, as they are now having to negotiate tensions between their feminist principles and not creating uncomfortable conflict in their personal relationships. For

example, Ferguson notes how she has heard her own students refusing to condemn homemaking as a valid choice as this would mean also condemning their mothers. Being supportive and respectful of other people's choices is emphasised as important by participants such as Tara: "I definitely agree that we should all be...supportive of each other" (Group 5). On the other hand, if feminists suspend their judgement they can feel like they are failing their feminist principles and risk appearing not to have the conviction to raise their voices. It is interesting to note that it is the decision to pursue homemaking instead of a career which Alice alludes to in her comments about not judging choices, as this is one of the 'choice debates' the participants tended to comment on more generally. As noted before, choice-focused forms of feminism (such as third wave feminism) tend to favour the reclamation of traditional feminine practices (such as homemaking, taking an interest in fashion or wearing make-up and other beauty products) (Press, 2011b). Other forms of feminism are undermined by this discourse as any critique or objection to a particular practice can risk a feminist being placed in the subject position of 'thought police'. Another subject position which feminists risk being placed in is that of 'feminazi' which has connotations of a feminist who wants to control and restrict what other women do. These are both very disempowering subject positions for feminists to be placed in, as they invite ridicule and easily allows feminist challenges to particular practices (such as cosmetic surgery) to be dismissed.

Third wave feminism is considered to be compatible with a consumer society due to its emphasis on women's freedom to express themselves (particularly sexually) and as a result is much more embedded in consumer society and its ideals than previous generations of feminism were (Press, 2011b). Historically, many second wave feminists criticised products with a focus on enhancing a woman's sexual appeal and on bringing female bodies more into line with a narrow set of beauty ideals. Second wave feminists critiqued Western society for how it oppressed women by confining them to a limited range of social roles and by sexually objectifying their bodies. However, both postfeminism and third wave feminism criticise this second wave view as being 'repressive' and Press (2011b) argues that it is the postfeminist sensibility which makes young women suspicious of second wave critiques of sexualisation. This discourse operates to frame feminists as being judgemental and making unsolicited and inappropriate moralising judgements. As noted by Ferguson (2010), these charges to feminists



come from both the right and the left of the political spectrum. In particular from those on the left who are concerned that feminists are judging those women who choose to be stay-at-home mothers, enjoy heterosexual sex and/or wear make-up and enjoy other markers of traditional femininity. This negative view of feminists who judge other women's choices as repressive is referenced by several of the participants, such as Gwen in the extract below:

Extract 67

Gwen

/Yeah...it's like..“oh..you're not a proper feminist..you...wear lipstick..you paint your nails..you clip your eyebrows”...so fucking what...[laughing]..like..does that actually matter? [...] Pick a bigger battle...pick something more important than...ya know..crying about whether or not...ya...mate's..fucking painted her nails or not.  
(Group 7).

As Press (2011b) noted, feminists who make judgements about women's choices to reclaim femininity can often be seen as repressive, moralising and as unwelcome. This is reflected in the way participants such as Gwen dismisses such judgements as being unimportant and perhaps even as petty nitpicking: “so fucking what...[laughing]..like..does that actually matter?” (Group 7). Gwen's views that critiquing women's sartorial and beauty decisions is a trivial pursuit is further qualified by her suggestion that feminists should: “Pick a bigger battle...pick something more important”. Press (2011b) suggests that second wave critique of beauty ideals and traditional gender roles has been mutated via postfeminist and third wave rhetoric into both a celebration and reclamation of traditional feminine social roles (such as homemaker and stay-at-home mother). Both third wave and postfeminist rhetoric place an emphasis on women's 'freedom' to look sexy and construct a 'sexy' identity (defined of course by the normative dimensions of 'sexiness', such as wearing low-cut, revealing clothing, retro-lingerie and high heels) or the 'freedom' to appropriate and reclaim apparel associated with traditional femininity and 'girliness' (such as pink, 'girlie' clothing, an interest in homemaking and childrearing). What were once considered to be archetypes of female subordination are now held up as symbols of 'liberation' and empowerment. For example, pornography is held up as sexual liberation, marriage as a pro-feminist celebration of love, and labiaplasty as a practical enhancement (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). This reclamation, according to Press (2011b), can lead to confusion and anxiety in young women as they are

growing up with third wave and postfeminist rhetoric which actively and uncritically pursues the same (pre-feminist) identities and styles, while being simultaneously aware the second wave of feminism criticised and lambasted these as being oppressive and discriminatory. This is something which participants such as Eva Sandra, Tegan and Alex appear to be alluding to:

Extract 68

Eva

//But I want those decisions to be both ways because I've unfortunately been part of conversations with people who identify as feminist but then go on to criticise women's choices/.

Sandra

/Yeah../that FUCKING pisses me off/.

Tegan

//Eurgh that's my biggest hatred of feminism/.

Alex

/Yeah.

(Group 4).

According to the rhetoric of choice feminism, the subject of the 'feminazi' or 'judgemental feminist' thinks they have the right to tell people how to live their lives and decide who counts as a 'good feminist' are constructed as intruding on what are framed as 'personal matters' (Ferguson, 2010). This is reflected in Eva's comment that: "I want those decisions to be both ways" and Tegan's: "That's my biggest hatred of feminism". Here, feminists are seen as denigrating and devaluing individual choices made by women and turning people away from feminism as a result (Ferguson, 2010). This is reflected in the way Gwen constructs 'judgemental feminists' as 'gatekeepers' of feminism: "oh..you're not a proper feminist..you...wear lipstick..you paint your nails..you clip your eyebrows" (Group 7). I would suggest Gwen could be invoking the notion of the 'good feminist' which I identified in my blog dataset from Study 2. Kiraly and Tyler (2015) consider that discussions of whether or not a particular woman is a 'good feminist' or a 'bad feminist' or whether they have made an 'acceptably' feminist choice sidelines the focus on important activist work and analysis of structural/material inequality, while blaming individual women for their circumstances.

This discourse then plays with power relations in the way it casts feminism in a negative light, inviting women to distance themselves from feminism (or at least those ‘judgemental feminists’). In contrast third wave feminism (with its emphasis on self-expression, the ability to choose a highly sexualised lifestyle and the notion that the self must be continually worked on, improved and transformed) moulds feminism into a form more compatible with consumer society’ (Press, 2011b). Jovanovski (2015) notes that this form of feminism has risen to prominence due to it being seen as less threatening to the status quo and to it providing reassurance to the mainstream that feminists are not a ‘scary other’. This discourse then results in the more palatable choice feminism being placed in a position of privilege, while placing other more critical forms of feminism at a disadvantage. Similarly, Ferguson (2010) proposed that choice feminism developed as a response to criticisms of feminism (which can disaffect those who could potentially identify with feminism) and its political function is to make feminism appeal to the broadest audience as possible. She suggests choice feminism aims to defuse these criticisms through painting feminism as non-threatening and welcoming to all (regardless of how diverse feminists’ views can be) and requiring only the ‘thinnest’ of political commitments. Kiraly and Tyler (2015) refer to this as ‘feminism-lite’ and argue there is an interest in promoting this form of feminism as it does not offend or overtly threaten any power structures and has become so watered-down that anybody could use it. They argue this feminism-lite lacks intellectual rigour and political challenge and instead is constituted primarily by notions of empowerment, choice and individualism. It is this watered-down choice-form of feminism which Kiraly and Tyler consider to not only dominate mainstream media, but to have become the “be all and end all of feminist thought” (p. xii). This discourse then serves the interests of those who do not want unequal gender relations to be challenged. This is because choice feminism does not require much in the way of political commitments from women, nor does it provide women with a framework for challenging gender disparities.

This narrow definition of feminism as being about choice can be observed in Catherine’s (as seen below in extract 69) suggestion that feminists could do more to educate women about ‘empowerment’ through choice:

#### Extract 69

Catherine

//It {feminism} could just like...educate people in a way like..it could say...ya know women are now allowed to do...what..what they want..so like if a woman is in a controlling relationship and stuff like...to educate them and say like “you don’t have to be in this ..like this..is...not your choice” sort of thing...but then...as well for the women who...do stay at home and do just want to look after their children and that..that’s not wrong either..like to say it’s your personal choice sort of thing.  
(Group 1).

The way feminism is constructed here could be argued to be both narrow (with its reductionist construction of feminist activity as simply being about education/awareness raising) and very classed (with its focus on issues such as parenting and relationships). The subject position offered here is that of ‘autonomous agent’ (albeit one in need of enlightenment by feminists who can open their eyes to this autonomy) who can decide if they are happy with their circumstances (for example, their relationship) and if not, can then decide to change or leave those circumstances. This is reflected in comments such as Nina’s that women should only do something: “because you..want to do it...not because you think...should” (Group 7). Alice (from Group 5) expressed in a similar vein that: “As long as..as long as you...do what you do because you want to rather than because you feel..er..you have to”. Here, the notion of choice operates to occlude any notion of external influences and constraints which may hinder or prevent women from freely making their choices (such as their ability to leave a controlling relationship). Kiraly and Tyler (2015) point out that more ‘choice’ (or a greater ability to choose) does not necessarily mean greater freedom, especially when the available choices are constructed on the basis of inequity.

One particular issue that choice feminism has been critiqued for is the way it obscures any and all notion of power relations operating to constrain and restrict women’s negotiation of their life course. This discourse strips all sense of context from the lives of women and treats all choices as though they are made in a cultural and political vacuum, beyond the reach of any external influence (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). Catherine’s comment that: “women are now allowed to do...what..what they want” is reflective of this. Choice feminism fails to differentiate between those who are able to make choices and those who cannot, and fails to analyse how intersections such as class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and (dis)ability can affect women’s choices. Instead, through this lens, choice is

viewed as being simply a matter of individual responsibility, thereby meaning women who make the 'wrong' choices (such as entering low-paid, low-status employment, or 'failing' to leave a controlling or even violent relationship) can be looked down upon and blamed for their 'failure' to make the 'right' choice (Ferguson, 2010). A further issue with choice feminist rhetoric which Ferguson (2010) highlights is that as choices are viewed to be individual, private matters of no concern to anyone else, they are seen to have no social consequences, thereby relieving women of taking responsibility for considering the broader implications of their choices.

From this perspective it is considered inappropriate to politicise women's choices and critiquing the value of different decisions is discouraged. This was seen in extract 68 when Sandra ("Yeah.../that FUCKING pisses me off/") and Tegan ("//Eurgh that's my biggest hatred of feminism//") exclaimed their distaste in feminists who make judgements about other women's choices. What this does is close down spaces in which to have a critical discussion about different choices and what they mean for society. More problematic still, it discourages women from taking an active role in politics and campaigning to improve areas such as (flexible) working conditions and childcare provision as these are constructed as private matters to be dealt with on an individual basis. Indeed, such political discourse is absent in most of the group discussions (though not all). Though this postfeminist discourse could be argued to be political in the sense that it supports certain political ideologies (such as neoliberalism and conservatism) in the way it serves to abdicate state responsibility for problems and instead places responsibility in the individual. Therefore, the framing of postfeminist discourse as 'apolitical' makes it a particularly insidious discourse.

Choice-centric forms of feminism have been criticised by feminists for recasting women's liberation as an individual and private struggle, rather than a collective-based one which acknowledges and analyses the shortcomings of systems of power and privilege that exist in society (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). Kiraly and Tyler (2015) argue that in this form, feminism has been boiled down to nothing more than personal statements or testimonies made by women about whether they like or dislike particular aspects of their lives (in this case, whether they like a relationship or not, or want to be a stay-at-home mother). Others consider it to be a weak and depoliticised version of feminism which does nothing to challenge the

status quo (Mackay, 2015). Without any analysis made which can draw links between the individual and larger structures of power, privilege and oppression this means any difficulties remain problematic and unchallenged. Third wave feminism advocates a shift away from understanding gender in collective terms and instead promotes a 'politics of difference' which uses the specificity of individual women's experiences as its starting point (Budgeon, 2011). Indeed, some feminist activists see choice as being reified by this discourse to the extent that any choice made by a woman is automatically ascribed as being a 'feminist choice' simply because of the fact it was made by a woman (Mackay, 2015). Similarly, Kelly (2005) contends that this discourse's promotion of 'the individual solution' (whereby a woman chooses what is 'best' for her) is also flawed, as this is not necessarily or always the best solution for all women.

Mackay (2015) found in her own research that many feminist activists felt personal choice is reified to the extent that it is considered taboo to question choices (such as those in relation to pornography, the sex industry and lap dancing). They lamented how practices which they viewed as anti-feminist could be defended as "her choice" and empowering, thereby silencing any dissenting views. This reification of women's choice was seen earlier on in both Alice and Gwen's comments when they express their feelings about women (and/or feminists) who criticise women's choices. It can also be seen in Catherine's suggestion that feminism should teach women that in regard to the decisions they make: "that's not wrong either..like to say it's your personal choice sort of thing". Ferguson (2010) believes the reification of choice is motivated by a *fear* of politics and aims to sidestep any potential tension and conflict by not questioning any choice made by a woman. Ferguson views this as problematic since judgement, exclusion, and calls for change are all unavoidable features of politics. She suggests this is a fantasy vision of a world where politics does not exist and where everyone 'gets along' not because they agree but because they want to avoid conflict. This leads Ferguson to query the point of someone having a political consciousness if they are too afraid to use it. I propose that this may have links with the 'unplugged girl' subjectivity I identified in relation to the discourse "what is feminism for? The war is won". The women in the mini-focus groups appeared to adopt an 'unplugged girl' subjectivity as a way of demonstrating their distance from and apathy towards politics, social movements and activism. At the same time the participants are invoking a notion of choice

which is framed in individual terms and is apolitical. Perhaps there is a connection here which warrants further exploration.

#### *8.2.4 Summary*

Across the mini-focus group dataset I identified a discourse of postfeminist sensibility as constituted by individualised notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility, and the 'can-do girl'. I have shown how participants deployed this discourse in two key ways. Firstly, participants drew upon this discourse to suggest that equality is achievable through individualised actions, as opposed to collective actions. I noted how participants juxtaposed their constructions of the active individual who 'gets things done' and brings about change with the passive feminist who talks and achieves very little. Through this narrative of individualisation, the subject position of 'feminist' is rejected by participants in favour of the 'can-do girl' who is seen to be ambitious and as taking advantage of the opportunities presented to her. Secondly, participants deployed the discourse in a way which reified women's choices. I noted how choice was constructed as being a personal matter, devoid of politics or external influences. Participants frequently repudiated feminists who 'judged' other women's decisions, dismissing them as 'petty' or 'moralistic'.

### **8.3 “We want ‘equalityism’, not feminism”: a postfeminist discourse of gender neutrality as constituted by backlash notions such as ‘what about teh menz?’**

#### *8.3.1 Introduction*

The third discursive pattern identified as being deployed across the mini-focus group dataset was postfeminism as constituted by backlash notions of 'the pendulum swinging too far' (from a position where women were discriminated against to one where men are now discriminated against), sometimes referred to in online communities (such as feminist blogs, internet forums and social media)

as ‘what about teh menz<sup>23</sup>?’ This discourse was frequently deployed by participants to downplay the importance of feminism and women's rights and place emphasis on the need to focus on men's rights, in particular when a group was discussing men's rights in relation to clothing, paternity leave, flexible working and the choices boys can make. What was also interesting in the data was how participants often repudiated terms such as feminism and women's rights in favour of more ‘degendered’ (or gender-neutral) terms such as human rights, equal rights and equalism:

Extract 70

Clara

/I think more nowadays it would be right to call it human rights..but I think in the past it was probably more appropriate to call it women's rights because we didn't have the same rights.  
(Group 2).

While participants emphasised the need for degendered terminology and a gender-neutral focus when it comes to fighting for equal rights, many participants oriented this in relation to men and placed emphasis on a ‘need’ to focus on men's issues and men's rights. So while on the surface these calls for ‘equalism’ appear to be invoking notions of liberalism and egalitarianism, I argue that this also has roots in backlash rhetoric and will now discuss the genealogy of this discourse.

Backlash refers to a discourse which proclaims that women have ‘made it’ and the fight for equality has largely been won, while simultaneously blaming feminism for various ‘ills’ of modern society such as professional women suffering from burn out, the ‘feminisation’ of poverty and claiming that men are the ‘new’ victims of discrimination (Faludi, 1993). Faludi (1993) stresses that the backlash against feminism is not a co-ordinated conspiracy, rather that the people who serve its ends are often unaware they are deploying backlash discourse and may even consider themselves to be feminists. She explains how the workings of backlash discourse are internalised, diffuse and chameleonic and argues that the fact that there is no ‘organised movement’ involved makes it harder to see and therefore makes it more effective and destructive. Faludi suggests that it is most

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<sup>23</sup> The spelling of this discourse is linked to its frequent invoking in online interactions. The deliberate misspelling by feminists is: “to parody the rush-typed outrage so often conveyed” by those who deploy this discourse (SPR, 2013, p. 1).



powerful when it is internalised by a woman and turns her vision inward, rendering its appearance as apolitical. However, I would suggest that since the early 1990s when Faludi made these comments, there has been a surge in men's rights organisations and campaign groups forming such as 'Justice for Men & Boys', 'Fathers for Justice', and 'A Voice for Men' linked with the increasing usage of the Internet and developments in user-created content such as blogs and micro-blogging sites such as Twitter (Kimmel, 2013).

There are those who argue that the emancipation and enfranchisement of women has had a dramatic impact on the lives, experiences and life opportunities of men (Mulgan, 1994; Wilkinson, 1995). This has led to a shift from a preoccupation with women's rights to a "broader set of concerns which encompass, for example, the ways in which men may be disadvantaged, discriminated against and mistreated" (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, p. 243).

#### Extract 71

Fay

But if we're talking about equal rights...if women must have equal rights as men then men should have equally enough...rights as the women..so...//even if they don't need to be there if they don't want to be there they should have the choice/.

(Group 1).

This shift in focus is often referred to as 'What about teh menz'. 'What about teh menz' is often deployed in conversations centred on women's issues and/or feminism. For example, if there is a discussion (usually online in spaces such as social media and comment sections for news sites) about supporting female victims of domestic violence, someone will respond with something on the lines of "But men can be victims of domestic violence too". This has been criticised by feminists as a tactic used to 'derail' discussions and debate. Geek Feminism Wiki (2015) defines this 'derailing' tactic as a process whereby the discussion of one issue is diverted onto the discussion of another and point out that it is usually deployed by members of the group whose behaviour was being criticised in relation to the original issue. Rather than retaining the focus of a discussion on the needs of women, this tactic instead "centre[s] the needs of the relatively privileged group and ask[s] the activist to reframe the conversations or actions around members of that group" (Geek Feminism Wiki, 2015, p. 1).

Across the mini-focus group dataset this discourse was deployed by participants in the following ways. Firstly, the discourse was deployed to imply that feminism or the progression of women's rights 'has gone too far' and that feminism is not sensitive enough to the 'plight of men'. Across the dataset participants frequently proposed that men face issues and pressures 'too', while women's issues were often downplayed in terms of importance. For example, Tara (Group 5) suggested that men have less choice than women in terms of activities they can do without risking being branded as 'deviant': "it is pretty weird that...the erm...the men don't get as much...//erm...I don't know..not rights but like...women have more choice of things and they don't get laughed at if they do...man things// whereas if a bloke did it {feminine activities} they would". Secondly, it was deployed by participants to effectively 'degender' issues and repudiate terms such as feminism and women's rights as being too 'exclusionary'. Participants viewed such terms as being too focused on women and as excluding men. Instead terms such as 'equality' and 'human rights' were favoured by participants. For example, Nika (Group 2) suggested that the term women's rights separates women from men and that the rights of both men and women should fall under one banner: "It's like basically I agree [laughs] with women have rights, but I just think it should just be human rights".

### 8.3.2 *"Feminism must not 'go too far' and take away men's rights"*

The early twenty-first century has seen an increase in the use of the Internet including the use of websites, message boards, social networks and microblogs such as Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram. As Jane (2014) highlights, internet-based interactions are no longer occasional adjuncts to 'real life', but have become both a dominant and integrated component of modern life. In this contemporary web-based context, 'what about the men' as a discourse has developed into an internet meme known as 'what about teh menz'. This meme is layered in meaning as it can be used not only to refer to the tactic whereby men try to 'derail' online discussions of women's issues by pointing out that an issue may affect men too or that men 'have it tough too', but it can also be used by feminists (such as in the form of GIF images) to mock men who attempt to derail feminist debates (Urban Dictionary, 2014). For example, the Tumblr

[mrasarefunny.tumblr.com/](http://mrasarefunny.tumblr.com/) focuses on mocking Men's Rights Activists. 'What about teh menz' is also referred to by feminist blogs such as 'Finally, a Feminism 101 Blog' (tekanji, 2007) and the 'Geek Feminism Wiki' (2015) as 'Patriarchy hurts men too'. On such blogs, this discourse is constructed as being a tool, as a derailing tactic, often used by men to 'silence' women's voices in online discussions and debates on women's issues. However, this discourse is not solely located in online spaces and goes back further than the growth in popularity of the Internet. Not only that, but this discourse can be and is utilised not only by men but by women as well and this can clearly be seen across the dataset. For example, Tara (as can be seen in extract 72 below) observed that men have less choice in their lives than women:

#### Extract 72

Tara

Hmm...yeah it is pretty weird that...the erm...the men don't get as much...//erm...I don't know..not rights but like...women have more choice of things and they don't get laughed at if they do...man things// whereas if a bloke did it {feminine activities} they would...so..like..I mean there's quite a few...well there's a lot of professional male...ballet dancers...but...they probably got laughed at a lot...//for doing it...erm...so..it's...one of them things they have to fight for and it's..I find it really weird that er...we get to do stuff now...that was...manly or boyee and nobody thinks anything...of it//...[laughs]/.  
(Group 5).

Similarly, Claudia (from Group 6) argued that men are more restricted than women in terms of their sartorial choices: "we can go out wearing trousers...we do not get looked at..like//..“oh you're in trousers”..but if a man goes out in a dress...“why's he wearing a dress?”//...and he gets looked at". Both Tara and Claudia construct equality in terms of individuals being able to wear whatever clothing they want or pursuing whatever hobbies they want, though it should be noted that Tara does not frame this issue as being about men's rights but as about choice. These could be argued on the one hand to be comparatively trivial issues compared to the issues facing many women today (such as violence against women and institutionalised sexism) and it could be possible that Tara is aware of this due to the way she does not frame choice of hobbies as being a rights issue. However, at various points across the group discussions, when discussing the issue of gender equality, many participants did appear to place a strong emphasis on the need to address men's issues and men's rights.

When tracing the genealogy of the 'what about teh menz' discourse, it can be seen that this has been referred to by different names in different periods of time as well as in different spaces (such as 'masculinity in crisis' in 1990s media and popular culture; the 'poor boys' or 'trouble with boys' education-based discourse of the 2000s; and as already stated, the 'what about teh menz' internet meme of the 2010s). To provide background context to this discourse, in the post-World War II period, for young working-class men living in the West, the transition to 'manhood' was marked by leaving school and entering employment (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). According to Nayak and Kehily (2008), employment in manufacturing was seen to provide not only a regular wage, but also stability, security and a 'job for life'. Such work helped working-class men accrue cultural capital such as through notions of 'physical hardness', 'craft or graft' and the patriarchal 'breadwinner'. In this period, for young men, earning a wage meant financial independence which allowed them to reside in the public ('masculine') world of work, thereby positioning them as clearly not being part of the private domestic realm of unpaid household duties which was marked as being 'women's work'. According to this discourse, post-World War II Britain was characterised by a clear and strict divide between the roles of the sexes and it was the role of young men to leave school, enter employment and provide for his family. Further, employment provided an identity for young men and was seen as something that instilled pride (Nayak & Kehily, 2008).

In the 1980s, the UK under a Thatcher government marked a period of de-industrialisation with mine closures and the dismantling of the manufacturing industry and with it the decline of what were traditional 'masculine' jobs. This change placed young men in a transition marked with uncertainty, providing a highly limited choice between the 'dole' or a place on a poorly-paid and badly structured government training scheme such as the Youth Training Scheme [YTS] (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). In the 1990s and 2000s the West witnessed an expanding service sector. This growing 'soft economy' consisting of services, retail, catering and call-centre work has been framed as the 'feminisation of labour' with value placed on stereotypical 'feminine' attributes such as docility, deference, flexibility, adaptability, teamwork, communication skills and personal presentation (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001; McDowell, 2002, as cited in Nayak & Kehily, 2008). According to Vail et al. (1999, as cited in Nayak & Kehily, 2008) from the 1980s and into the late 1990s, 'masculine transitions'

continued to be constructed in terms of opportunity, as well as risk, uncertainty and labour market insecurity. This discourse was bolstered in 1995 when think-tank Demos published a report called *No Turning Back: Generations and the Genderquake* (Wilkinson, 1995). In this report it referred to the insecurity and resentment felt by young unemployed men as 'predictable' (this qualifier was used more than once to signify male resentment) and dismissed the views of second wave feminists as ignoring the "real experiences of men – particularly younger ones who have never experienced the confident male superiority of the past" (p. 34). The Demos report claimed that it was men who were now the victims of new forms of discrimination such as positive discrimination (which is the process of giving preferential treatment to a minority group who had experienced prejudice in the past) in the workplace. The report described how "Even men with superficially 'liberal' values sometimes feel that the balance of equality legislation is wrong, seeing positive action as discrimination against 'the white male' and male unemployment as the fault of women" (Wilkinson, 1995, p. 33).

Throughout the 1990s, the media published countless stories expressing concern for the future of young men, who were recurrently depicted as suffering from a cycle of depression and dispossession, leading on to an identity crisis and despair (Whelehan, 2000). According to Whelehan, the 'explanation' often provided for this identity crisis in young men is that the progress made in women's rights since the 1970s provided women with new identities to claim, while offering nothing for men. The media promulgated images of feisty women and 'girl power', while at the same time employing discourse which suggested that it is young men who are the 'losers' of today and 'no hopers' of tomorrow (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Others claimed that the UK in the 1990s was in the middle of an historic change in the relations between men and women and this had resulted in a strong negative reaction from some groups of men and that these men's views needed to be understood sympathetically, rather than dismissed (Mulgan, in Wilkinson, 1995). The press and self-help books alike suggested a myriad of possible causes to the 'trouble with boys' ranging from unemployment, the decline in traditional masculine occupations, working mothers, absent fathers, young women's academic success, the lack of school discipline and the rise of feminism among many others (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Nayak and Kehily (2008) describe how during the 1990s and even the 2000s the

'masculinity in crisis' discourse provided "a compelling narrative which seems to 'tell it like it is'" (p. 39), but that really ought to be subject to scrutiny. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001) argue that not all young men were having 'a hard time', rather those from the 'right backgrounds', as well as some entrepreneurs were still thriving and certain power bases (e.g. the City) were still being dominated by men and male values. Nayak and Kehily (2008) describe the 'masculinity in crisis' discourse as being made up of both 'real' and 'imagined' contemporary dimensions of social change, consisting of multiple 'symptoms' and 'remedies'. This discourse then takes on medical connotations and has resulted in self-help and psychology books appearing in the 2000s which provides the discourse with 'credence' and 'authority' (Nayak & Kehily, 2008).

Sheila Rowbotham foresaw (1972, as cited in Whelehan, 2000) that a change in the lives of women would also necessitate a change in the lives of men. Nayak and Kehily (2008) question why men's roles being subject to change is being interpreted as a 'crisis', when as MacInnes (1998, as cited in Nayak & Kehily, 2008) suggests, it could be interpreted as a good thing? Whelehan (2000) proposes that viewing change as a good thing is what a healthy response would look like. However, most commentators in the 1990s responded in what Whelehan positioned as being an entirely negative way, which was to regard the improved lot of women as 'draining away' some 'essence' of masculinity and maleness. For example, more recently, US conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh (2010, January) who claimed on *The Rush Limbaugh Show* that "Colleges have been chickified. Men aren't showing up in as many numbers as they used to...This is what we have done to boys and men. The feminists/feminazis have been working for years to this end: advance women by diminishing men". This message has also been promulgated by other mainstream religious and conservative news media outlets and popular talk show hosts such as Glenn Beck, Michael Savage and Bill O'Reilly (Sarkeesian, 2011). This 'draining effect' or dispossession could also be seen presented in mainstream films of the time such as *Falling Down* (1993), *Fight Club* (1999) and *The Full Monty* (1997), the latter of which showed the male lead characters displaced from their (stereotypically masculine) occupation of steelwork and finding themselves unemployed in a city which is presented as being 'dominated' by women (symbolised in the film by women's consumption of male striptease acts) and feminised workplaces (such as the service sector and call centres) which are

characterised as being suited to those with (what are stereotyped as) feminine traits such as communication skills, which the male characters lack and thereby rendering the 'modern' workplace as inaccessible to them (Whelehan, 2000). Franks (1999, as cited in Whelehan, 2000) suggests that the film provided a convincing representation of the prospect of long-term unemployment and the devastation this causes for the majority of men. However, Whelehan (2000) argues that through this 'crisis of masculinity' discourse, such representations as *The Full Monty* are scapegoating feminism for the changes to the economy in the 1990s. The consequence of this is that blame is directed away from politicians who cannot support their own policies, which were still structured around the idea of a male 'breadwinner' in families. Franks (1999, as cited in Whelehan, 2000) argues that work *is* man's identity and unemployment can threaten a man's sense of self. Whelehan (2000) considers the representations in *The Full Monty* of the male characters' various responses to sudden unemployment serve to suggest that work makes men complete. According to Franks (1999, as cited in Whelehan, 2000) the film is a convincing representation of the prospect of long-term unemployment and that "It is difficult to overestimate the devastation that unemployment causes for the majority of men who experience it" (p. 139, as quoted in Whelehan, 2000, p.116). Allusions to the 'draining effect' of feminism and domination by women can be seen across my dataset such as in extract 73 below:

### Extract 73

Interviewer

Do you all think it's going to change then in the future then..so...like in maybe ten..twenty years/?

Fay

/It will just keep progressing...//until eventually like...everyone gets equal.

Interviewer

//Hmm.

Anna

Hopefully it will just stick at being equal rather than...it carrying on to be like...female-dominated...//cos I think that's...when it goes back to just being like the// problems that we've had...//cos then men will feel they will need to build themselves// up again.

(Group 1).

It is suggested by Fay and Anna that society is going to continue making progress towards equality. Here, progress is constructed as something that eventually needs to stop once: “everyone gets equal”. This implies there is an eventual end point in the campaign for gender equality, a moment, a position at which it can be said that equality has been achieved and nothing more needs to be done. It also constructs equality as a stable entity which once it has been achieved, it will remain so. This discourse then serves the interests of those in power such as politicians who seek to roll back various feminist gains such as reproductive rights and maternity leave. When this discourse presents equality as a process which just happens naturally, it also serves to obscure the way equality needs to be actively fought for and worked towards. It also hides the need for equality to be continually maintained and protected, in order to prevent erosion (or even reversal) of rights.

Anna also emphasises that progress should ‘stick’ in the position of being equal and not go any further, in other words to not ‘go too far’. This invokes the element of the ‘masculinity crisis’ discourse which depicts feminism as having ‘gone too far’ and failing to address men’s needs. Here, progress towards equality is constructed as having the potential to lead to a female-dominated society and even as taking something away from men: “cos then men will feel they will need to build themselves// up again”. This is framed as being a negative direction for progress to take and should therefore be avoided. This discourse then serves the interests of those who wish to see unequal gender relations be maintained and those who wish to promote the message that feminism aims to ‘diminish men’ (such as media personalities like Rush Limbaugh). It does this by invoking ‘fears’ that feminists are trying to dominate men, and achieve superiority. This undermines the work of feminism by misrepresenting the aims and goals of the movement.

Further, the prospect of a female-dominated society is constructed by Anna as having the potential to be the same as the previously more patriarchal society. Here, a female-dominated society is constructed as recreating the problems of the past but in reverse, the implications of which is that men as a group would need to “build themselves up again”. In other words, in this scenario men would be seen as the group needing support, attention and ‘emancipation’. This rings similar to Whelehan’s (2000) description of how in the 1990s men were portrayed



as being 'drained' by policies promoting women's equality. Later in the same mini-focus group discussion, both Fay and Anna invoked this 'draining effect' again in relation to men, as can be seen in extract 74 below:

Extract 74

Anna

We'd just cause the same problems.

Fay

It..it'd be unfair to take away men's equal rights...//if we were campaigning for...women's equal rights like...all the work that women had done..would...probably end up being undone when the men...switched and it'd just be like a seesaw...with it going either way// each time...it'd just be pointless.

(Group 1).

Backlash discourse is drawn upon by Fay to suggest that not only is it unfair to men to take away their rights but that it also harms women. This is implied through the suggestion that the work of women's rights campaigners would be 'undone', while Anna's suggestion that: "We'd just cause the same problems" could be read as implying this would replicate the problems women faced and transplanted onto men (further supported by her earlier comment in extract 74 that: "when it goes back to just being like the problems that we've had...cos then men will feel they will need to build themselves up again"). This complicates the utilisation of this discourse as it also implies that if the work of women's rights campaigners is 'undone' by men losing their rights, then the goal of these campaigners was not to 'dominate' men in the first place (which is something the 'what about teh menz' discourse does imply). The notion of women taking something away from men in terms of equal rights is again invoked by Fay here. Interestingly, this scenario is framed using the see-saw analogy, which as highlighted by Whelehan (2000) is often how gender equality has been portrayed, with the implication being that if women rise up, then men *must* fall down with no option for equilibrium between the two being considered as a possibility. However, here this 'see-saw' process is framed by Fay as being pointless, the implication of this being that there needs to be a balance between the two sexes. Fay reiterates her points again when she asserts that: "I don't see why there should be one thing that's...better for men or one thing that's better for women/". In conversations between the participants such as here, the subject position of 'egalitarian' is taken up. To adopt the subjectivity of 'feminist', is constructed as

being 'unfair', 'problem making' and ultimately 'pointless'. This discourse then serves to undermine the work of feminism, making it unpalatable to women for fear of 'draining men'.

To return to genealogy, the gender equality as a see-saw analogy (Whelehan, 2000) was often invoked in public discussions of gender equality in education in the 1990s and 2000s, where girls overtaking boys in terms of educational achievement was then treated as a 'moral panic' and a 'crisis' which needed rectifying (Browne, 2004). According to Nayak and Kehily (2008), by the late 1990s education was seen as one of the key nodes marked by 'masculinity in crisis', along with health, crime, and employment. Browne (2004) refers to this as the 'poor boys' discourse which views boys as 'victims' of the impact of feminism on society and educational programs aimed at achieving educational equality for girls. This notion of 'poor boys' is invoked by Julia (in extract 75 below) who in response to being asked if she thought things will be different for the next generation of women (such as 'our daughters'), responded with the suggestion that: "I hope things will be better in a way for our sons":

#### Extract 75

Julia

And in a way it may sound daft but I..I hope things will be better in a way for our sons...//cos I think...//like I said I think...girls have actually got it pretty good at the moment...erm...I think..ya know...we were talking about Beavers and Cubs//...and...Brownies and Guides...and...like I said..the..erm..Chloe feels very comfortable...playing and doing anything from any range...of topics..subject..she..she's happy climbing trees...//she's happy erm...ya know playing with cars and boys...ya know sort of footballs..and sporty things or..and she's quite happy painting her nails and...playing with crafty things...and...so I..think...my...er..from what I can see so far..Chloe seems to have the world at her feet//...and can do anything...whereas Toby<sup>24</sup> is very still reluctant to...ya know..she would go along and go with Beavers and Cubs...and be quite happy to do that...whereas Toby would never go into a Brownies'...//group.  
(Group 5).

Julia does appear to be invoking this notion of 'poor boys' who 'have it bad' in comparison to girls: "Chloe seems to have the world at her feet". Statistics in the 1990s suggested that young girls were more optimistic than boys about the future

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<sup>24</sup> Both Chloe and Toby are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of the participant's children.

and that girls had not only closed the achievement gap at all levels in education, but had overtaken boys, and were thereby less likely to be unemployed than men post-education (Wilkinson, 1995). Further, educational settings were accused of becoming 'feminised', with female-dominated teaching claimed to be favouring girls and impeding boys' progress, and therefore boys were seen as being in need of what were termed 'recuperative masculinity' strategies to help them achieve (Browne, 2004). Though Julia does not make reference to educational settings, she does draw upon scouting organisations (such as Girl Guides and Cubs) as a location where boys seem to be less comfortable than girls. Julia's alluding that her son: "would never go into a Brownies'...//group" is interesting. Here it is framed as being because boys are oppressed or disadvantaged in comparison to girls when it comes to having freedom to participate in a variety of activities. However, it could be argued that this is because Western culture is one in which activities and hobbies deemed as feminine (such as Brownies and craft) are repudiated. Boys who partake in what are constructed as feminine activities are punished and/or ridiculed. This can be seen in the number of times participants make references to the reactions of the general public to men in female-dominated professions (such as nursing and childminding): "You see a guy..on a nursing course...or a bloke on a hospital ward..dressed as a nurse..your first instinct is.."is he gay?" (Helen, Group 3); "he was a stay-at-home husband..and he was a dad...and that's what he did..but the crap he got for it" (Helen, Group 3). Indeed, references to men in more 'feminine' occupations having their sexual orientation brought into question (and by extension their masculinity) is brought up by other participants such as Claudia: "...but you would hear every so often..a..a gaggle of girls going..."oh do you think he's gay?"...well why does he //have to be gay?" (Group 6). Participants such as Helen and Claudia express their support for men to be able to enter women-dominated professions and their frustrations at those who are not supportive. This can also be seen in the extract below:

#### Extract 76

Nika

It's weird because I wn't actually ever think..like I always teach my son like he can be whatever he wants to be...like he loves..he loves his nails painted in like football colours...and..'cause I always paint my nails he's always like.."Mum can you do me Leeds United nails or..."...and like peop..older people on the bus before have said.."Oh..why have you got your nails painted?"...and I'm like..he's like..this was when he was like

three..I'm like.."He's three years old"...and they like.."Oh..you shouldn't be having your nails..."and I was just like.."Well..."  
(Group 2).

Like with Claudia and Tara's earlier comments in relation to men having less choice when it comes to clothes and hobbies, the discourse drawn upon by Nika and Julia positions boys as oppressed. Boys' oppression is constructed as 1) boys having less freedom and choice than girls, and 2) boys facing discrimination from others for their choices. In terms of power, this could be interpreted as trivialising the issues women (and girls) face in the UK today. For instance, GirlGuiding (2013) conducted a survey and found that 70% of 13-21 year old girls said they had experienced sexual harassment at school or college and 87% of 11-21 year old girls believed women are judged based more on their appearance than on their abilities. This discourse then serves to draw attention away from issues faced by girls (such as sexual harassment and body dissatisfaction), and instead to draw focus entirely onto boys' issues (such as having more restricted fashion choices) by suggesting these are on an equal level. This discourse also positions girls and boys within an 'us vs. them' power relation, again, like with the see-saw metaphor invoked by Fay. This arguably encourages people to 'pick sides' rather than seeing value in supporting progress for everyone.

There are several problems with this discourse. For instance, Foster et al. (2001, as cited in Nayak & Kehily, 2008) points out how the notion of 'poor boys' was both a recurring and emotive discourse in Western countries such as Britain, the US and Australia. This led Nayak and Kehily (2008) to propose that maybe this was really a 'white crisis' rather than a masculine one as this discourse does not appear to be prominent in non-Western parts of the world such as China and India. A further issue is that the 'poor boys' discourse leads to solutions being suggested which are based on essentialist ideas around how men and women should support children's development (such as in education or childcare settings). In other words, that boys need male role models to make education appear 'cool' and to bring in more 'masculine' teaching styles, practices and approaches to learning. This also implied, as mentioned earlier, that education had become too 'feminised' and by extension that female teachers all use 'feminine' methods and practices which were hindering boys' learning and development (Browne, 2004). Browne (2004) points out that there is also a political element woven into this 'poor boys' discourse in that the supposed

'feminisation' of education is used to attack and disempower feminism. In her interviews, Browne (2004) showed how some early years practitioners accept these politicised arguments (and with them the stereotypes about women teachers), while others reject the blame and frame it as 'guilt' being 'chucked' at them to make them feel it is their fault that boys are 'failing'.

Some feminists argue that this discourse distracts attention away from the difficulties they believe women still face in Western society. Some such as Harris (2004a) argue that young women are having just as difficult a time as young men in this late modern period (Harris, 2004a). German (2007) highlights how men's problems are sometimes ascribed to them now occupying a more traditionally female role (e.g. working part-time and taking on some childcare responsibilities rather than being in full-time employment), but as she contends this is unlikely to be the case, as very large numbers of men still go out to work and men still dominate the high status, high power jobs in Western society, while women are still more likely to be taking up the majority of housework and child-rearing duties. As German notes, househusbands are still relatively uncommon, and those who are househusbands are often combining child-rearing with (relatively well-rewarded) part-time work which provides them with a high degree of autonomy enabling them to work from home. In sum, this discourse serves to occlude the continuing unequal power relations between men and women by suggesting that men's rights are being undermined and women "have the world at [their] feet" (Julia, Group 5).

### 8.3.3 *"It should be human rights, not women's rights"*

What I found particularly curious in the dataset was that in addition to the tendency for participants to keep orienting discussions of gender equality from women's issues to men's issues, there also appeared to be a keen emphasis on 'degendering' equality issues. Indeed, this became apparent in participants' conversation to the extent that several participants repudiated gendered terms such as 'feminism' and 'women's rights'. These participants tended to advocate the use of more gender-neutral terms such as 'equal rights' and 'human rights', or even created their own terminology such as Penny (as seen in extract 77 below) who proposed 'equalityism' as a possible substitute for feminism:

### Extract 77

Penny

/I think..I think they {men} see it {feminism} as like...women versus men rather than...equality [laughs]//...they don't realise it's about...yeah..they don't see it as..equality..they just see it as...women...trying to be better than men [laughs]..which isn't the case...like I think a lot of them are feminists but they don't realise.

Helen

//Yeah...they {men} expect a battle of the sexes.

Rose

Hmm.

Helen

It's equality not superiority.

Penny

Yeah.

Rose

But a lot of men don't realise that..so I think that if you label feminism {as} campaigning for other..females...it's just gonna..not gain as much support as it could rather than.

Penny

Maybe they should give it a different name.

Rose

Yeah exactly I think..word/.

Penny

/Like equalityism [laughs].  
(Group 3).

As I found in my dataset, several participants repudiated terms such as 'feminism' and 'women's rights' arguing them to be too exclusive and insensitive to men. For instance, when Helen and Penny agree that feminism is about equality (and not superiority of women over men), Rose counters that: "a lot of men don't realise that" as she suggests the term is too interlaced with connotations that it focuses on women's rights rather than equality in general. I noticed these gendered connotations were latched upon by participants time and time again when explaining their dislike of the term 'feminism'. Penny's suggestion of 'equalityism' as a possible alternative to the word feminism is very similar to 'equalism' which is a term that appeared in my Study 2 blog data where one blog author recounted how: "On a family drive, my mother told me that she

didn't like 'feminism', and preferred to call herself an 'equalist', whatever that was" (Mookychick, 2011c). Indeed, when typing the term 'equalist' into the search engine *Google*, the front page alone had seven out of ten items where the term was discussed in relation to feminism, with titles such as 'Why I'm an equalist and not a feminist'. Blogger Jarrah Hodge (2012) wrote that after uploading a video to the Internet explaining what feminism is, she received many responses arguing that "if feminism is really about equality, it should be called something broader like 'equalism' or 'humanism'" (p. 1). Hodge considers that people who make this argument can be split into two distinct groups. The first group are people who agree that more work needs to be done towards women's equality, but see this as part of a broader equality movement. She suggests they may also be reluctant to adopt the feminist label due to an associated negative stigma. The second group are those who do not believe feminism is necessary as a movement because they argue that men are equally or more discriminated against in society than women are. This group, according to Hodge, accuse feminists of ignoring male inequality in conversations about equality.

Power is a factor here, feminist bloggers such as Hodge (2012) argue that tackling gender inequality in society requires a specific lens and that because women are generally more marginalised than men, they need their own narrative space (and allies) to discuss women's experiences and women's issues. Hodge suggests that if the specific issue of women's inequality is not named, and there is no analysis made of the systemic power structures which privilege men over women then there is the possibility that the issue will be de-prioritised. This is a concern, as this discourse was deployed many times by participants in response to questions about issues and disparities women face today. This discourse serves to deflect attention away from women's issues and arguably serves the interests of men's rights activists. [MRAs] who seek to undermine the work of feminists. Some feminist bloggers (tekanji, 2007; Geek Feminism Wiki, Date Unknown; Faster, Date Unknown) argue that discussions of men's rights and masculinities while important, should not be conducted in spaces created to discuss women's issues (whether feminist or not). Rather, feminist bloggers argue it is men who are the ones who need to take responsibility for creating their own spaces to discuss men's issues. At the same time feminist bloggers position themselves as being outside of the men's rights debate and as not being responsible for creating or providing spaces for men to discuss men's issues

(tekanji, 2007; Geek Feminism Wiki, Date Unknown; Faster, Date Unknown). This view was absent in many of my participants' conversations as many seemed to occupy the opposite pole suggesting the importance of 'carving out a space' to discuss men's issues when discussing women's.

As already stated, many of my participants favoured more 'neutral' terms such as 'equality', 'equal rights' and 'human rights' which appears to serve the purpose of demonstrating a speaker's commitment to 'equality for all', while distancing them from (what were seen as) 'exclusive' concepts such as women's rights. For instance, Nika (as seen in extract 78 below) who appears to feel uncomfortable with the concept of women's rights, or rather in terms of linguistics seemed to suggest this in her comment that the term women's rights is "just..in itself separating us from men":

#### Extract 78

Nika

I don't know...sometimes I think it's sort of contradictory..'cause it's like..women's rights..and that's just..in itself separating us from men...it's like..basically I agree..[laughs]..with women have rights..but I just think it should just be..human rights/.  
(Group 2).

This discomfort seemed to be commonly felt among my participants, with many participants keen to stress their support for the concept of 'equality for all' and aversion to what they saw as exclusive terms. Nika's suggestion that women's rights as a term is unnecessary and instead the term 'human rights' should be used, suggests that equality issues should be treated in a neutral and degendered way. As argued by feminists such as Hodge (2012), there are issues that feminists consider as requiring a gendered lens in order to be effectively analysed and challenged. Again, I find it curious that many of the participants seemed to advocate a neutral and degendered approach to equality (and even more curious that this 'degendered' approach was frequently oriented in relation to men). I argue that in order to better understand this discourse we need to look at where it comes from and so will now do some further exploring of its genealogy.

Modernism is the set of values and practices which emerged from the eighteenth century Enlightenment period. It is sometimes referred to as the post-



Enlightenment project due to it being underpinned by the conviction that humankind can and should create a better world through its own efforts. This involved replacing irrationality with rationality and reason, and a shift away from ways of knowing based on religion, magic or superstitious beliefs to using scientific methods of empirical inquiry. Among the central tenets of Modernism was the belief that people have certain fundamental entitlements and that institutions should service human interests and respect human rights (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). According to Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001), the rhetoric of Modernism promotes liberal humanism which has become the dominant ideology of late modernity, and as they pointed out, it co-existed with the much older tradition of male power and racism. This rhetoric of emancipation emerged as a result of a number of key historical events including both the American and French revolutions in the late eighteenth century. However, in both cases emancipation was restricted to a select number of the population and excluded women (in both cases) and African-Americans (in the former case) (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Such restrictions to emancipation did not go unchallenged though and resulted in various reformist and revolutionary movements spawning over the course of the nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth centuries. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001) argue that while there has been progress made (over a very long period of time), Modernism's heralding of equality is still far from complete and has a long way to go. For example, the women's suffrage movement has achieved the vote in democratic countries, while on the other hand, there is still a gap between the sexes in terms of pay and status within institutions of power and in the workplace.

In late modernity, liberalism has become the dominant ideology and liberal democracy has become the global model form of democratic government (Browning, 2000; Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). Liberal democracy is based on the assumption that even though people may have divergent self-interests, they all share a foundation of common interests (Stainton Rogers & Stainton Rogers, 2001). According to Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (2001), liberalism is underpinned by the philosophy of liberation, which stresses freedom and the right of individual citizens to choose how they live their life. Liberalism seeks to encourage 'human betterment' by regulating the public sphere, while at the same time not interfering in people's personal lives in order to promote the idea of individual freedom. A liberal society is valued and seen as

one which is organised to promote the interests of free, equal and rational individuals and allow them to flourish (Browning, 2000). According to Browning (2000), the twentieth century has been seen by liberals to endorse the practical efficacy of liberalism. Liberalism's promotion of freedom and individuality cohere with the logic of modern social practices and the success and spread of liberalism has been enabled by the way it closely aligns with capitalism. Capitalism promotes consumers and calculating individualism, which harmonises with the core values of liberalism (individuality, rationality and freedom) (Browning, 2000). Indeed, there are similarities here with the individualist notions which were discussed earlier (in relation to the second discourse: Sisters are looking out for themselves) in terms of emphasis on individualism and the importance of a society where individuals are free to choose their own goals and freedom in their interactions with others (Browning, 2000; Frazer, 2000).

However, liberalism has been critiqued, in particular for notions it shares with neoliberalism, and Browning (2000) highlights how some of this critique has centred around the work of John Rawls, as exemplified in his work *A Theory of Justice* (1971). In this work, Rawls elaborated a 'thought experiment' in justifying an approach to redistributing resources. In this experiment, individuals were imagined as deciding upon principles of justice while occupying an 'original position' in which they were assumed to be ignorant of their own attributes, status and goals (e.g. unaware of their gender, ethnicity, occupation and socioeconomic status, as well as their own needs such as supporting dependent children) and also ignorant of their position relative to others. This was taken by Rawls as a way of ensuring fairness in the individual's perspective, as he assumed the individual's ignorance would result in them adopting a disinterested and just standpoint. Additionally, Rawls believed that if an individual did not know what particular notion of 'the good' they support then they would inevitably support a framework for society in which all people can pursue diverse conceptions of 'the good'. A fundamental feature of Rawls' liberalist approach was its emphasis on public neutrality over the promotion of any one particular conception of 'the good'. Here, the role of the public sphere is seen as not to promote any particular notion of 'the good'. From the perspective of liberalism, to pursue a 'common good' is considered to be politically oppressive in terms of it subordinating individuality and autonomous choice to a collective goal (Browning, 2000). In support of this view, Ronald Dworkin (1982) argues that political decisions must as far as is

possible be independent of any particular conception of 'the good', as showing a preference for one conception over another is not treating citizens as equals. This impartiality and political neutrality is held up by liberalists as being a strength of liberalism which enables it to accommodate the value of pluralism in contemporary society (Browning, 2000).

Rawls' advocacy of government neutrality between conceptions of 'the good' drew criticism from a number of sources including postmodernist thinkers. Postmodernists denounce liberalism's claims to neutrality and establishing universal truths, and instead argue it to be reproducing questionable Enlightenment assumptions (Browning, 2000). Postmodernists such as Young (1990) criticises liberalism for its emphasis on individualism and instead advocates the expression of radically distinct group standpoints deconstructing hegemonic notions of the 'public good'. This view is also supported by radical feminists who contend that dominant liberal perspectives are being shaped by particular male interests rather than general human needs (Browning, 2000). Another critique, as put forward by Browning (2000), is that liberal neutrality does not guarantee that all standpoints will be equally expressed and heard. He argues that the viewpoints of minority groups can be overridden by the hegemonic perspective and that neutrality can then serve as an excuse for a lack of direct action to challenge entrenched discrimination. Hewlett (2000) delineated how other criticisms made against liberalism argue that it has left the public sphere weak and underdeveloped, accompanied by over-privatisation. This in turn is argued to result in a depoliticised, passive population which is either unwilling or unable to participate in debates about public issues.

Group rights for cultural minorities (such as special rights to representation and special land use rights) are considered to be inconsistent with liberalism because they are 'special' and not universally applicable to all individuals. Liberalism aims to eliminate differences between individuals and argues that all individuals are worthy of the same treatment so concepts such as 'group rights' are seen to be incompatible with this philosophy (Eisenberg, 2000). According to Eisenberg (2000), in the twentieth century after the Second World War, there was an increasing tendency towards recognising individual, but not group rights. This, he suggests was the result of political circumstances with the USA beginning to see itself as the 'defender' of universal and individual rights. I would argue that many

of the participants drew upon such notions of treating all individuals identically and appeared keen to distance themselves from the idea of giving 'special' attention to particular groups (such as women). An example of this can be seen in Julia's (as seen below in extract 79) comments where she adopts the subject position of 'equal rights advocate', and rejects a feminist subjectivity:

Extract 79

Julia

I would...more..like you said..put myself as an advocate for equal rights...than particularly it being feminism...and..that..would be the issue that would...stick out to me..ya know..it's more sort of..like you said..whether it ya know...it comes under the same ha..bracket of racism or...erm..ya know sort of making sure that it..doesn't matter who your religion or your ability..disability..erm...so I don't really feel that I align myself with the term feminism...but...I would feel that I would be someone who would...ya know..feel that it was important to have//...equal rights.  
(Group 5).

Julia makes references to other axes of injustice (such as religion and dis/ability), and as has been noted previously, within this discourse and across the other two discourses identified operating across the mini-focus groups, there is a lack of acknowledgement that feminism addresses these issues as the category of gender can and does intersect with other categories (such as ethnicity and dis/ability). This discourse then occludes unequal power relations between men and women by treating them as equal and neutral individuals. Pateman (1989) criticises liberalism for the way it fails to recognise differences in gender and ethnicity, treating all individuals as if they were equal and neutral, despite late modern societies still being marked by inequality. Some feminists such as Hodge (2012) believe that feminism goes 'hand-in-hand' with other movements for equality such as anti-racism, but as noted, this is something that is rarely acknowledged by the participants. It is perhaps because of this, that participants such as Julia felt unable to adopt a feminist subjectivity and felt they had to choose (what is perceived as) the more 'egalitarian' subject position of 'equal rights advocate'. Young (1990) argues that distributive theories often ignore the biases of institutional structures, despite their profound effect in ensuring a systemic advantage for some groups over others. This systemic advantage is something rarely acknowledged by participants, due in part I argue, to participants' drawing on individualised discourses. According to Eisenberg (2000), most liberal and democratic theories fail to account for systemic biases

and presume that institutions are neutral in regards to different interests. She notes how interest-group pluralists assume power is equally available to all groups, but argues this is implausible as all nation states favour particular cultural values (e.g. a national language with which all public life is conducted) and recognise a specific state religion (according to the values and traditions of which public life is often structured). Eisenberg (2000) further argues that despite purporting to serve citizens of diverse backgrounds equally, state institutions tend to promote particular versions of history, myths and a specific set of values.

Riley (2001) refers to the 'what about teh menz' discourse as 'new sexism' which she defines as accounts which function to maintain male privilege, while also reducing the 'hearability' of sexism and thereby presenting the speaker as egalitarian. This discourse then allows underlying power structures to remain stable in the face of overt societal change. It also serves the interests of those wishing to maintain unequal gender relations such as those in positions of power and MRAs as it elides unequal power relations between men and women. According to Riley (2001), a key discursive strategy found in studies involving men and/or women (e.g. Griffin, 1989; Cockburn, 1989) is one where a distinction is made by participants between 'feminism' and 'feminists', whereby participants disavow feminism while endorsing feminist values (as characterised by the phrase "I'm not a feminist but..."). For example, Thomas (1995, as cited in Riley, 2001) found that most of her male participants supported feminism in terms of agreeing with equality and an overall liberal political ideology, thus allowing them to claim feminist values. However, the participants did not assimilate gender politics into their perspective, allowing them to not only reject the feminist movement itself but also reproduce traditional gendered constructions (such as positioning childrearing as a woman's primary responsibility). Riley (2001) argues that this decoupling of feminist values (framed as 'good') from feminists (framed as 'bad') serves to deligitimise those who call for social change and to minimise gender politics' impact on current gender relations, as well as degender inequality by camouflaging the historical role of men in women's oppression. Riley suggests that the success of challenges to 'old' sexism (which was overt) has enabled 'new' sexism (which is internalised) to take hold, which she argues is powerful, naturalised and invisible. As I have noted before, I find it interesting that through the dataset, participants adopted an egalitarian subjectivity through their advocacy of a gender-neutral approach to equality, while at the same time, often

orienting this in relation to how equality needs to focus on men just as much as women. An example of this can be seen when Claudia (as seen in extract 80 below) asserts that to her: “equality equals men”:

#### Extract 80

Claudia

/Cos I..I would be honest I'd..[sighs]...I wn't..like I say I wn't actually say 'feminism'...I'd say...equality...that's// what I want in life//..equality...it's not...//I'm not talking about...I'm not talking about women...this is for women..whereas I feel like..equality equals men..and that's what I'm trying to// get at everything.

(Group 6).

As was the case with participants such as Rose, Nika and Julia, there is distancing here from feminism as a term and even a strong repudiation of this as a concept. Again, participants reject a 'feminist' subjectivity in favour of the subject position of 'equal rights advocate' or 'egalitarian'. Gender neutrality is advocated as being desirable: “equality...that's what I want in life..equality”. In her own research, Riley (2001) argued that male participants redefined feminist values by positioning “equality in terms of gender neutrality” (p. 67). According to Riley, this gender-neutral approach treats men and women in the same way regardless of context and assumes men and women are interchangeable in terms of entitlement. This gender neutrality is problematic, as through this approach to equality, no attention is paid to existing disparities in status, power and rights, and instead people are treated as individuals rather than by their category membership.

#### *8.3.4 Summary*

Across the mini-focus group dataset I identified “we want equalityism, not feminism”: a postfeminist discourse of gender neutrality as constituted by backlash notions such as ‘what about teh menz’ and liberal notions of ‘equality for all’. I have shown how participants deployed this discourse in two key ways. Firstly, participants drew upon this discourse to suggest that men ‘have it bad too’ and that attention needs to be paid to men’s issues and rights, just as much as women’s. What this discourse serves to do is draw attention away from women’s issues (such as rape and domestic violence) and arguably refocus it on

comparatively trivial issues (such as men being able to wear skirts or play with 'girlie' toys). Secondly, participants frequently repudiated gendered terms such as 'feminism' and 'women's rights' and instead advocated more neutral terms such as 'human rights', 'equal rights' and even 'equalityism'. As many participants seemed to prefer to look at equality issues through a gender-neutral lens, some participants felt unable to adopt a feminist subjectivity due to its perceived 'exclusion' of men.

#### **8.4 Summary of the chapter and final remarks**

A key finding which was identified within the dataset, to a greater or lesser extent, was an emphasis on gender neutrality and individualised solutions. Across the dataset, I identified participants deploying a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualised notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility and the 'can-do girl'. I argued that the construction of feminist subjectivity as passive rather than active makes it difficult for the participants to adopt. Instead, participants appeared to adopt the more (apparently) active subject position of the 'can-do girl' who has individual agency and does not need to rely on support from the state, nor have any need for involvement in collective action such as feminist politics. Participants also deployed a postfeminist discourse of gender neutrality as constituted by backlash notions such as 'what about teh menz?'. Participants curiously advocated a gender neutral approach to equality, while simultaneously stressing a 'need' to focus on men's issues to the same extent as women. This served to belittle women's issues (such as rape, prostitution and domestic violence) as they were treated as being on the same level as men's issues (with examples being given including whether a man can wear a skirt or a boy attend Brownies).

As was seen through all three<sup>25</sup> discourses in the mini-focus group dataset, many participants stated they did not claim a feminist subjectivity, and instead frequently took up subject positions such as the 'unplugged girl', 'can-do girl', 'equal rights advocate' and 'autonomous individual'. In the next chapter, these

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<sup>25</sup> This includes the first discourse "What is feminism for? The War is Won" which was presented and discussed in chapter 7.

findings from Study 3 will be recapped and discussed alongside the findings from studies 1 (women's magazines) and 2 (feminist blogs). There I reflect upon the implications of these findings, as well as on how this research contributes to knowledge.



## **CHAPTER 9 – SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND REFLEXIVE DISCUSSION**

### **9.1 Introduction**

#### *9.1.1 Outline of the chapter*

The main purpose of this chapter is provide a discussion of the research which forms the basis of this thesis. The first aim is to re-present the aims and objectives of Studies 1, 2 and 3. I then provide a recap on the discourses identified within the data from both studies.

The second aim is to evaluate the entire research process (including sampling, data collection and analysis of data) through a reflexive discussion. I will do this by drawing upon Wilkinson's (1988) reflexive framework which is based around three dimensions: 1) personal (a reflection on my personal interests, values and investments in the topic); 2) functional (an evaluation of the benefits and limitations of the data collection methods used); and 3) disciplinary reflexivity (a consideration of the possible implications of the research).

The third aim is to propose the thesis' original contribution to knowledge, and consideration of the possible implications of my research findings. This chapter then concludes by offering suggestions for how this research may be built upon in further research and by making some final concluding remarks about the thesis.

### **9.2 Summary of research aims and discourses identified across the data**

Before concluding this research project, I will first recap the aims of Study 1, Study 2 and Study 3, as well as recap the discourses I identified in each study.

The first objective of this research is to examine discourses in the medium of printed women's monthly magazines and online feminist blogs, paying attention to how gender and feminism are constructed. This objective is also concerned with what subject positions are made available by these discourses. This first objective was addressed by Study 1 (magazines) and Study 2 (blogs) which were

both media text studies involving a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of the media sampled.

The research questions for Study 1 :

- 1a) How are gender and feminism discursively constructed in women's monthly magazines?
- 1b) What subject positions are being made available by these discourses?

The three discourses listed below were identified in the women's monthly magazines:

- "Girls just want to have fun": a postfeminist discourse of 'girl power' and the 'phallic girl'.
- "Cause I depend on me": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions of self-improvement, personal responsibility and self-surveillance.
- "All you need is love": a traditionalist discourse of 'necessary heterosexuality', 'reproductive destiny' and romance.

The research questions for Study 2 are:

- 2a) How are gender and feminism discursively constructed in online feminist blogs?
- 2b) What subject positions are being made available by these discourses?

The two discourses below were identified in the feminist blogs:

- "Do what you want. How you want": a postfeminist discourse as constituted by 'girl power' notions of aspiration, empowerment, and personal choice.
- "Are you feminist enough?": a feminist discourse of 'the good feminist'.

The second objective of the research was concerned with exploring how young women interpret and construct gender and feminism and the difficulties/tensions (if any) they encounter in negotiating these. This objective was also concerned with how young women position themselves in relation to feminism. This objective was addressed by Study 3 which involved a feminist-informed poststructuralist discourse analysis of data generated from seven mini-focus group discussions with young women aged 18-30.

The research questions for Study 3 are:

- 3a) How do young women co-construct feminism?
- 3b) How do young women position themselves in relation to feminism?
- 3c) What are the difficulties and contradictions young women encounter in claiming a feminist subjectivity within the context of mini-focus groups?

I identified three discourses across the mini-focus groups dataset, which are listed below:

- “What is feminism for? The war is won”: a postfeminist discourse of feminism as irrelevant, inaccessible and situated in the past.
- “Sisters are looking out for themselves”: a postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualised notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility and the ‘can-do girl’.
- “We want ‘equalityism’, not feminism”: a postfeminist discourse of gender neutrality as constituted by backlash notions such as ‘what about teh menz?’

### **9.3 Evaluation of the research**

Before engaging in a reflexive discussion of my research, I will first provide some background discussion of debates among critical and feminist researchers regarding the most appropriate way to evaluate research which is qualitative in nature. Most general research methods textbooks, as well as undergraduate psychology courses such as the one I studied on focus primarily on quantitative research and approaches to evaluation underpinned by positivist notions of research (such as research needing to be reliable, objective and valid). I argue here that these traditional approaches to evaluation are inappropriate for qualitative and critical research such as my own and clarify the approach I will be taking (that of reflexive discussion).

In mainstream psychological research, the prominent criteria used for evaluating research are validity, reliability and replication (Bryman, 2008). The positivist notion of science views the purpose of research as being the creation of ‘true’ and ‘objective’ knowledge of social reality, and the production of valid results via

scientific method (Saukko, 2003). According to Saukko (2003), the positivist criterion of 'truthfulness' and validity is understood to be universal, meaning the same rules and checks apply regardless of the goals of the research. However, as Saukko (2003) argues, the 'Mead-Freeman'<sup>26</sup> controversy revealed the problems with an approach to evaluation which is grounded in positivism. For example, positivism is underpinned by a desire to ensure research is 'neutral', i.e. that the research is not biased by the scholar's personal or political commitments, but as Saukko notes, the Mead-Freeman controversy illustrates how research is bound up in its own historical, social, political and theoretical environments.

Bryman (2008) delineates how different researchers in the social sciences approach evaluation. Some have attempted to apply the criteria of reliability, replication and validity to qualitative research (e.g. Mason, 1996, as cited in Bryman, 2008; and LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, as cited in Bryman, 2008), while others have argued that due to these criteria being grounded in quantitative methodology, this renders them wholly unsuitable for qualitative research. Bryman (2008) argues that while ecological validity (in particular) was largely formulated in the context of quantitative research, it is a criteria which he feels fares well when applied to qualitative research and even suggests that qualitative research is stronger than quantitative research according to this criterion. Bryman's argument here is that qualitative research often involves a 'naturalistic' stance whereby the researcher aims to collect data in naturally occurring situations and environments. Bryman notes that while this clearly applies to ethnographic research, it can be argued that this also applies to in-depth interviewing. Similarly, Wilkinson (1998a) refers to focus groups as being a relatively naturalistic method due to the way it enables spontaneous interaction between people unlike more mainstream approaches such as structured one-on-one interviews. Indeed, this is one of the reasons I chose to use mini-focus groups in my third study.

Regardless, some qualitative researchers such as Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2008) have suggested that qualitative research should be

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<sup>26</sup> The 'Mead-Freeman' controversy refers to anthropological research on Samoa conducted by Margaret Mead in the 1920s (Mead, 1929). Mead's work became the focus of a major dispute over validity. Not long after Mead's death in 1978, Derek Freeman denounced her work as 'non-valid' and 'wrong'. Freeman (1983) set out to refute Mead's study through his own work, which itself was critiqued for being incomparable to Mead's due to a variety of methodological differences.

judged according to different criteria than that which is applied to quantitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2008) propose the following criteria for evaluating qualitative research: credibility (how believable are the findings?); transferability (do the findings apply to other contexts); dependability (are the findings likely to apply at other times); and confirmability (has the researcher allowed her/his values to impact on the research to a high degree?). Hammersley (1992, as cited in Bryman, 2008) proposed relevance as a criterion which evaluates how important the topic being investigated is to the broader disciplinary field and what it contributes to the literature in that field. As Bryman (2008) notes, these different criteria which have been proposed are linked to the different objectives qualitative researchers argue are distinctive to their area. Indeed, I would also argue that the differing commitments of scholars which frame the research (historical, political and theoretical) should be taken into account when making decisions over what criteria to use when evaluating their research. In contrast to Lincoln and Guba's (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2008) suggestion to use 'alternative notions of validity' (Saukko, 2003), Lather (1993, as cited in Saukko, 2003), proposes instead to draw upon a notion of 'multiple validities'. Saukko (2003) feels that this latter approach has two advantages. The first advantage is that it draws attention to the theories, methods and modes of writing which underpin research and opens up different, partial and political views on 'reality' and the need for scholars to be more critically aware of what is driving their research. The second advantage is that this enables an acknowledgement that there is more than one way to 'make sense of' and study social phenomena and places emphasis on developing a more multidimensional, nuanced and tentative way of understanding the object under study. Saukko (2003) believes that the notion of multiple validities "suggest that we should approach reality in less simplistically dichotomous ('true' or 'false'; 'right' or 'wrong'; 'heaven' or 'hell') and more complex terms" (p. 19).

To return to the fields of critical psychology and feminist research, Nencel (2014) argues that the majority of feminist researchers would agree that feminist research is done differently to other types of research due to its aim to be non-exploitative and its utilitarian ethos (that research should aim to support change, rather than merely for the sake of producing knowledge). Wilkinson (1988) discusses how psychology as a discipline in the UK and the US is dominated by the positivist paradigm, and anything that falls outside of this (such as feminist

and qualitative research) is devalued and/or dismissed. Similarly, research which focuses exclusively on women is systematically devalued, and feminist research is characterised as 'political' and therefore not objective, value free or scientific. Wilkinson (1988) refers to this as a form of control and observes that it positions feminist researchers as 'deviants', though Wilkinson believes there is potential for feminist researchers to bring about change in academic psychology. One method she proposes for challenging the dominant positivist paradigm is for feminist researchers to define their own criteria for evaluating research. Wilkinson (1988) argues that one of the most powerful tools feminist researchers have to bring about change is the serious application of self-reflexivity. Wilkinson believes that disciplinary self-awareness is a key factor in the future development of feminist scholarship. In feminist research, self-reflexivity is considered to be an essential process for 'unsettling' hierarchies whereby the data (or 'the text') becomes a co-constructed space which reveals the interaction between the researcher's assumptions and positionality, as well as the voices, stories and experiences of the participants. In this context, self-reflexivity ensures that research relationships are egalitarian, non-authoritative and intersubjective (Nencel, 2014).

Both feminist and critical psychology scholars (e.g. Wilkinson, 1988; Nencel, 2014) emphasise the importance of acknowledging the various ways in which our personal values, life experiences and social positioning may influence the research process and suggest that this can be done through reflexive discussion. According to Nencel (2014), feminist researchers exercise reflexivity in various ways and the most common of these is for the researcher to deconstruct their 'positionality'. Through this 'measure of disclosure' (Chiseri-Strater, 1996, as cited in Nencel, 2014), the researcher reveals her/his assumptions, histories and identity and considers how these may have had an impact on both the intersubjective research relations and the research process itself. Feminist and critical research is underpinned by the notion that 'the text' cannot exist independently of the subjective conditions through which it is (co-)constructed by the participants and the researcher. In contrast to other forms of research, here the researcher's situatedness in their research is pushed to the foreground with the researcher's position in 'a grid of power relations' reflected upon in relation to how this can impact upon methods, interpretations and knowledge production (Nencel, 2014, p. 77).

Nencel (2014) refers to this form of reflexivity as 'corrective' and some feminist scholars (e.g. Nagar, 2003; Pillow, 2003), are critical of this 'corrective' approach and view it as problematic. For example, Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity is a 'tool of the privileged' as it is only the researcher who possesses reflexivity in the text and it is the researcher who shares power and gives voice to 'the voiceless'. Pillow goes further to argue that this could be seen as perpetuating colonial relationships with the researcher attempting to 'mask' their power over the participant(s). Nagar (2003) contends that the feminist goal to transform the power hierarchies embedded in knowledge production is not going to happen simply through researchers discussing how they represent themselves and others. Feminists such as Pillow and Nagar propose alternative approaches to reflexivity (such as integrating their own 'stories' alongside the stories of participants when writing up their research), but Nencel (2014) considers that the way forward in reflexivity would be to consider *all* of the different approaches to "writing oneself in or out of the text" (p. 81) as viable and possible without one being prioritised over the other and all being considered to be good feminist practice.

As I argued earlier, it is important to take into account the historical, political and theoretical commitments of the research when making a decision on how to evaluate your work. As my research is underpinned by social constructionism and is informed by feminist concerns such as unsettling hierarchical power relations in the research process, I believe that reflexive discussion is the most appropriate approach for evaluating my work. In research informed by social constructionism, the personal characteristics, life circumstances and disciplinary background of the researcher can affect what s/he chooses to study, the methods s/he chooses and her/his analytical interpretation of the data. While a positivist epistemology would view acknowledging such values as a source of bias and an obstacle to determining 'the facts', in social constructionist, feminist and critical work these values are seen as being both central to and as a resource informing one's research. Critical feminist work places emphasis on the centrality of personal experience and the grounding of knowledge through the researcher considering how their identity and position in society influences their research (Wilkinson, 1988; Adamson, 2014).

For the purpose of this chapter, I will draw upon Wilkinson's (1988) framework for reflexive discussion which is based around three dimensions: personal; functional; and disciplinary reflexivity. Personal reflexivity refers to the researcher's own identity and centres around the notion that an individual's research is often an expression of their own interests and values and therefore the topic under study is likely to be derived from personal concerns (Wilkinson, 1988). Functional reflexivity involves the researcher reflecting on their methodological decisions (e.g. sampling methods, data collection) and on the researcher's relationship with the participants. Disciplinary reflexivity is concerned with the extent to which a researcher's interpretations of the data are congruent with their (in this case feminist) research agenda and how their findings fit into and contribute to the broader field (in this case the field of critical feminist psychology). While Wilkinson (1988) stresses that these three dimensions can 'bleed' into one another (in particular personal and functional), I have chosen to present my reflexive discussion in three sub-sections corresponding with each dimension.

### *9.3.1 Personal reflexivity: personal values, social positioning and investments in the research topic*

My own personal interest in feminism goes back to childhood. As a child I was vaguely aware of the Women's Liberation Movement of the mid-twentieth century, though this was mostly informed by mass media representations (which were not always positive!) and also became aware of the suffragist movement of the early twentieth century. At this point, my understanding of feminism was of it being a historical movement which no longer existed and was unaware that a 'third wave' was taking place during my years in compulsory education in the 1990s. I believed firmly in equal rights and was told throughout this period that we were all equal and that there was no longer a need for feminism. Indeed, when I entered the teen years this coincided with the rise of 'girl power' and the peak of the Spice Girls' popularity. The rhetoric of 'girl power' and 'you go girl' was inescapable and 'laddettes' seemed to be appearing everywhere from radio and magazines to television and newspapers.



This was also the period when New Labour entered power and we were being told that 'things can only get better', that we (read: girls) could do anything and everything we wanted to. Despite growing up in this zeitgeist of 'girls can do anything' I could not help but notice what looked like inequality to me in different areas of life, ranging from boys consistently being granted the power to choose class activities (all under the guise of democracy of course), to noticing gender disparity in the subjects girls and boys chose at school, through to female-dominated professions being low-paid. From a young age, I could not help but ask: if we are all equal, then why is it that women are still the ones who are expected to take on the bulk of domestic chores and child-rearing? However, as I was unaware that the feminist movement was still active at this point, I had no resources with which to articulate my thoughts and feelings in relation to gender inequality.

It was not until I studied sociology at A-level that I had the opportunity to study feminist ideas in an educational setting which I enjoyed, though again feminism was treated as being fixed to a particular period in history and nothing current from the feminist movement was acknowledged. Gender, and critical psychology did not feature in Psychology at A-level and disappointingly was mostly absent from my undergraduate degree as well. Studying qualitative approaches was boiled down more or less to thematic analysis which caught my interest. Over the course of the 2000s, I grew more concerned with the way our society was becoming increasingly hyper-sexualised and 'pornified', such as how the Playboy bunny logo made appearances on clothing worn by staff in childcare settings and young girls (under 10) wearing what I would call sexualised clothing. This eventually led to me reading books such as Ariel Levy's (2005) *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and Jessica Valenti's (2007) *Full Frontal Feminism*, as well as discovering the existence of feminist blogs and magazines. I was excited to discover that feminism was alive and active, though dismayed at the lack of coverage it was receiving from the mainstream press as well as at how most of the women around me did not consider themselves to be feminists.

This latter point is what led to me choosing to study the topic of young women's (dis)identification with feminism. I found myself becoming interested in why young women would proclaim their belief in equal rights, while dismissing feminism in the same breath. I also could not help noticing during this period (the late 2000s)

that the mainstream media were growing interested in rebranding feminism, in order to make it more 'appealing' to young women. These pieces were often accompanied by statistics (sometimes produced by the media, and other times by academics) proclaiming that young women were no longer interested in feminism and saw it as irrelevant and out-dated. I never really felt these quantitative surveys and vignette-based studies gave any real insight into why young women were repudiating the feminist label. Some feminist academics such as Pamela Aronson (2003) were critical of the media's many declarations of the 'death of feminism', arguing such claims were rarely empirically tested. I also felt the voices of young women were absent in many of these cases with journalists and academics speaking on their behalf. Furthermore, I was concerned with the way quantitative research could be 'leading' women in their responses through the use of closed surveys with a narrow range of pre-set answers to choose from. I also greatly disliked the way these quantitative studies tended to box women into categories such as: "I'm a feminist"; "I'm a feminist but..."; "I'm not a feminist but..."; and "I'm not a feminist". This exercise in box-ticking and placing women into different groups based on a few closed-questions seemed too simplistic to me. I was interested in having a more open design to my research and a qualitative approach was most suited to this goal. This desire to have an open design influenced the kind of questions I developed in my discussion schedule. I did not want to lead my participants in particular directions or influence the kind of topics they discussed and instead created broader questions (such as asking women about their experiences and their thoughts on feminism) in order to see what direction participants took the conversations in. As I will discuss in more detail when engaging in functional reflexivity below, this decision may have impacted on the kind of themes that came up in the mini-focus group discussions.

I feel it is important to acknowledge the influence my feminist values had on the research design. I wanted to make the research experience for my participants a positive experience and was keen to provide a safe and open space to talk. I felt mini-focus groups would be conducive to this by providing a more intimate space for participants to talk and one that would feel less intimidating than a more traditional and larger focus group would. When recruiting participants, I preferred to refer to the mini-focus groups as 'group discussions' rather than as 'focus groups' or 'group interviews', firstly to avoid the business and marketing connotations the term 'focus groups' conjures up and secondly, to make my study

appear more approachable and friendly, rather than formal and regimented. I felt when moderating the discussions, it was important to provide a safe and open space for the women to think about their answers, rather than me imposing my views on them. After the first mini-focus group, I asked the women for their thoughts and feedback on the research process. One of the women, "Fay", said how she liked that I provided them with the space to talk, a point her fellow group members showed agreement with:

Extract 81

Fay

I think it was good..you gave us...like plenty of opportunity to..talk about our opinions..you didn't...like push us too much so I think that's a good way to go about it.  
(Group 1).

I took this comment as a positive sign that my aim to have a broad and open approach towards the group discussions had been met, though it is also important to bear in mind that due to various power dynamics operating between myself and the participants (which I will discuss in greater detail below) there is always the possibility of the participants not wanting to upset my feelings or be critical in my presence. At the beginning of this same group discussion, when I asked the participants what drew their interest in taking part in my study, a few of them said they liked that they were going to take part in a study that was going to include only girls. For instance, Catherine expressed how she would feel less comfortable taking part in this study if there were men taking part as well:

Extract 82

Catherine

Erm...I don't know..I just think it makes me like a little...bit less nervous//...when it's just girls.

Interviewer

//Hmm.

Interviewer

So does it make you more..nervous if there are guys in the room?

Catherine

It's just a bit more awkward I think [laughing] you don't have as much to talk about/.  
(Group 1).

Some of the participants such as Fay and Anna further qualified this by stating that some of the men they know hold strong opinions towards feminism and felt they would not take the topic seriously and choose instead to make jokes: “/A lot..a lot of my friends are quite sexist..like ‘women belong in the kitchen”” (Fay, Group 1) and: “made a lot of kitchen jokes...all the time” (Anna, Group 1). From comments such as these, it is clear that the women in my study valued being able to speak freely without the presence of men who they felt would not engage with the topic. Not only that, but Catherine’s comment: “you don’t have as much to talk about” could be interpreted as meaning women have less space to talk freely in the presence of men and that some topics could not or would not be discussed in such a context. I bore these comments in mind when running the third mini-focus group as one participant had asked if she could bring her male friend along to watch the group discussion(!) and told her he could not join us as it may affect the research process. I was also worried that allowing someone who was not participating in the study to observe my participants discussing their thoughts and experiences would impact on how much the participants would feel comfortable disclosing.

An important point to consider regarding unequal relations of power between the participants and myself as a researcher relates to the question of whose interests are being served by the research. My study required a relatively large time commitment on the part of my participants (these group discussions ran from two and quarter hours to over five hours) and I knew from my previous experience of conducting one-on-one interviews that, many people seem to prefer completing short surveys, which can make recruiting people to take part in studies which require more of them difficult. With this in mind, I felt it was important to give something to my participants in return for taking the time and effort to take part in my study and disclose their thoughts on subjects such as feminism (for some in front of their friends, for others in front of strangers). I provided snacks for the participants to consume during the discussions and entered all of the participants into a prize draw for a £50 voucher (and those who were psychology students were also awarded ‘participation points’ which I discuss further in the next paragraph). As another benefit to taking part in my study, I offered to my participants the option to receive a summary of the findings upon completion of the project. Still, I feel that these benefits for the participants, are not comparable to what I will gain from the research (an academic qualification, research

experience, and potential publications). On the other hand, the participants did seem to enjoy taking part in the discussions and quite a few participants at the beginning explained that what drew their interest in the study was being able to talk about women's issues and feminism:

Extract 83

Alex

it's just...actually a really good opportunity to...discuss..things..to like focus on things..cos you do touch on things when you're out and about but...it's...not the same as actually...discussing..having a..like..proper discussion about something..which is something I was really looking forward to.  
(Group 4).

Other participants said they saw the study as an opportunity to talk about topics they would not normally talk about: "it's nice to get together with friends and sometimes talking about things that you wouldn't normally talk about//...rather than just talking about children and nappies and [/laughs]" (Julia, Group 5) and "it's not really something that I...grapple with in everyday life//...like you say it's something..if it comes up it's just...small issues you think in your life that you don't...think deeper into" (Jo, Group 7). Others made comments that they thought it would be interesting to find out other people's views on subjects such as feminism and women's issues: "it's interesting to see how that..like..what other people think it {feminism} is as well..and then learn maybe what it actually is..and what it actually means and stuff" (Clara, Group 2) and "well it's kind of interesting finding out about each other's opinions about..like what we think about...//women in general or..erm...women's roles..and things like that..I guess [laughs]" (Tara, Group 5). Comments such as those by Clara and Tara are interesting when taken in conjunction with Alex, Julia and Jo's comments. While Jo, Julia and Alex's comments imply that women do not normally get to discuss topics such as women's issues and feminism in their day-to-day lives due to other preoccupations (such as child-rearing), Tara and Clara's comments suggest that they are genuinely interested in what other women think about feminism and women's rights.

All of the women who participated in the first and second mini-focus groups (as well as one participant in the third group), were either first or second year undergraduate psychology students from the university I am based in, and so

were taking part in a number of research studies in the department conducted by both final year undergraduate students and postgraduate researchers like myself. This was part of the department's Research Participation Scheme whereby students who participate in research are awarded participation points (1 point for every 15 minutes of participation). Once a student has accumulated enough points they are then able to use the participation scheme to advertise and award participation points for their own studies once they become final year students. Those who took part in my study were awarded 11-13 points (depending on how long the mini-focus group ran for) which was a higher number than the number of points being awarded for taking part in studies involving surveys or short experiments. At the beginning of these two mini-focus groups some of the women joked about wanting to take part in my study in order to earn the high number of points, making their decision to participate initially seem very utilitarian in nature. Interestingly, after the discussion had concluded and I had turned my recorder off, a couple of the women commented that they had found my study interesting and relatable and contrasted this with some quantitative studies they had taken part in earlier, which they said they had found confusing and uninteresting. I would suggest this bodes well for considering the value of this research, if women who do not identify as feminists and have never engaged with critical feminist work before express an interest in this study. This is further supported by how some of the women contacted me via e-mail after the discussions took place, expressing an interest in my findings. During each of the group discussions the women were relaxed, making jokes and appeared to be enjoying themselves.

Before moving on to consider the 'functional' dimension of reflexivity, I want to explore in a bit more detail how the relationship between myself as a researcher and the participants may have impacted on the findings. At this point I think it is important to outline some of the social locations I occupy and my position in relation to the participants from the mini-focus groups with attention paid to any unequal relations of power operating between us. There were some variations in terms of group demographics between each group as well as the locations in which the group discussions took place. The first three mini-focus groups I conducted, as well as the sixth group were all conducted in university buildings, while groups 4, 5 and 7 all took place in the homes of a participant from each group. University buildings were chosen as the location for some of the mini-focus groups (particularly if they involved students) in the hope that this would be

more convenient for participants. In the case of groups 4, 5 and 7, a participant from each group invited me to conduct the group discussion in their own home.

The different locations for these mini-focus groups could have affected the power relations operating between myself as the researcher and the participants. In the case of the groups taking place in a university setting, it could be said that the power balance was weighted in my favour as I had booked the meeting rooms, organised the layout of the room, provided snacks, provided directions to the room, and welcomed participants when they entered the setting. In contrast, I would say that the balance of power shifted when group discussions took place in the participants' own homes. In the case of group 7, I had to be provided with directions and make my own way there, while for groups 4 and 5 I travelled part of the journey and then received a lift from either one of the participants or their spouse for the rest of the journey. As these three groups took place in the participants' homes, I had no control over factors such as the layout of the room, external noise, or the time the discussion started. For example, in the case of group 7, there was no table for me to place the recorder on and I found myself repositioning it several times in order to try and find the 'ideal' position. This was in part due to the seating arrangements with some participants sat on seats and others sat on the floor and at odd angles to me which meant I could not see all the participants at once. However, all the women who invited me into their homes were friendly and made me feel welcome. Two of these groups provided their own cooking, baking and drinks, while another group (consisting of mothers of young children) had arranged with their spouses to collectively look after the children out of the house while we were engaged in the group discussion.

Another point to consider in relation to power relations is that the role of the researcher is generally a powerful one as it is the researcher (in this case myself) who organises the focus groups, who chooses the overall research topic for discussion and designs the questions on the discussion schedule. However, I would also argue that as a critical feminist researcher, I endeavour to unsettle such weighted power relations in my own research and as I discussed earlier, I was keen not to impose my own views on the participants. While I defined the overall discussion topic of women's experiences and thoughts on feminism and set the questions on the schedule, the direction of the discussions was led by participants and ended up in some unpredictable places. It was interesting to see

which themes cropped up across all of the group discussions (such as the pay gap, work-related issues, sexism and sexual harassment), as well as which themes were unique to a particular group. For example, group 1 talked at length about their secondary school experiences and their encounters with 'mean girls', something which other groups did not touch upon. Perhaps this is related to the members in this group being younger (18-19 years) than participants in other groups, who were in their mid-to-late twenties. There were participants in groups 2 and 5 who were mothers and talked about their experiences as mothers and their concerns for the gender issues their children face, such as boys being teased for wearing nail varnish in football colours or the dominance of Disney princesses in the girls' toy aisles. Group 4 was interesting in that members in this group all knew each other via the local punk scene and talked about gender issues particular to this such as how people attending music events assume a woman is only attending because she is with her boyfriend and not because of her interest in the music.

Age is another interesting marker of social position which could have impacted on the research process. The ages of the participants varied greatly from 18-30. Some groups consisted mainly of participants at the younger end of the spectrum, while other groups were mostly at the older end, in the middle or mixed. As I was aged 30 years at the time I conducted these mini-focus groups, this meant that depending on which group I was moderating, I was either a similar age to my participants or approximately ten years older. In the case of the younger participants, they were either undergraduate or PGCE students at the university I am based at, not only as a postgraduate researcher but also as a part-time lecturer. Although I have not taught any of the students who participated in my study, the fact that I am a member of the university teaching staff and they were students may have affected our relationship, in particular in regards to those who were eligible for 'participation points'. Being aware of our respective social positionings, I deliberately chose to dress at the more casual end of the spectrum rather than the more professional end to try and dismantle this hierarchy to some extent.

Another interesting marker is how I was positioned by participants as a feminist and by some of the women as someone who could impart information about feminism to them. A few participants at the beginning of the various group



discussions expressed how they chose to take part in this study because they were hoping to learn more about feminism: “/And I think like doing this study, maybe I’ll learn a little bit more about what feminism actually is” (Clara, Group 2). Others talked about how they thought this study sounded like it was on an interesting subject or one that it was important to know more about:

Extract 84

Nika

There’s all these things in the news..and stuff about....“is it too far?”...and..“are women becoming too..sort of..able to do whatever they want..and stuff?”...and I think...yeah...I just think it’s something that’s quite important to find out..like..know more about.  
(Group 2).

As I discussed earlier, I had gone into these mini-focus groups with the intention of taking an open approach to moderation in order to avoid imposing my own views. I had not planned on ‘educating’ my participants during these group discussions as I was interested in their thoughts on the subject and the discourses they drew upon. This means part of me feels like I let these women down by not providing much in the way of information about the feminist movement. Some of the women stated that there should be a ‘Dummy’s Guide’ to feminism or some kind of accessible book on the subject. As a result of these comments, I e-mailed to participants a recommendation of an introductory feminist book, which was *Reclaiming the F Word* by Kristen Aune and Catherine Redfern. The reason I chose this book was because I wanted to recommend a book which was not too inaccessible or academic for participants, nor one which tried to be too ‘populist’ by ignoring feminist history and making problematic statements (such as Ellie Levenson’s *The Noughtie Girl’s Guide to Feminism* in which she stated that rape jokes are acceptable) or peppering the writing with profanities (such as Jessica Valenti’s *Full Frontal Feminism*). The book I chose was written jointly by an academic and a feminist blogger and was written in an accessible way. Still, I felt somewhat uncomfortable with this positioning by my participants; I do not speak for the feminist movement and as someone studying feminism from an academic viewpoint, am painfully aware of just how diverse and varied feminism is. I would not want my own personal interpretation of feminism to colour the views of the women who took part in my study.

One particular instance which underlined myself being positioned by the participants as a feminist happened early on during the seventh mini-focus group. As the participants were settling down to start the discussion, one of the younger participants pulled out a bottle of nail varnish and asked my permission to paint her nails. I felt a little thrown and baffled by this question as this group discussion was taking place in the home of the participant's sister. When I said I did not mind her painting her nails during the discussion, she qualified her question by stating that she was worried that as a feminist I would be against women wearing make-up and painting their nails! This view of me as a feminist who is opposed to beauty accoutrements unsettled me, and I felt this was further compounded at various moments in this discussion with group 7, when this particular participant and her friend kept responding to my questions to say they were not angry about anything. As can be seen in the exchange below, I started to feel my exasperation was beginning to show as I tried to steer the participants away from the idea that anger is a necessary requirement for being aware or concerned about women's issues:

Extract 85

Gwen

/Yeah..exactly...so yeah..contraception makes me angry...er..abortion makes me angry..what else...what else makes me angry...what else makes somebody else [laughing] angry?

Interviewer

Yeah...well..has anyone else got any?/

Jo

/I'm not angry about anything/.

Nina

/Not necessarily angry..or...just/.

Jo

/No...I can't..no..I literally can't even think of anything...not that hard hitting..[laughs].

Ashley

Er...I don't really get angry/.

Interviewer

/Or even just...not necessarily angry...just things that might be...things that might...be issues...that matter to you..or might need changing.  
(Group 7).

By this point in the discussion, these references to feminism being about anger started to bother me, and I think maybe in part this stemmed from the earlier exchange about wearing nail varnish. While I do not believe that I speak for the feminist movement, part of me does want to challenge misconceptions about feminism. I would say though that this is the only time this feeling filtered through into any of the group discussions. On other occasions many participants demonstrated a lack of knowledge of the history of feminism and lack of awareness of current feminist campaigns. Examples include how participants in group 3 merged Emmeline Pankhurst and Emily Wilding Davison into one person in their accounts of the women's suffragist movement, while a few other participants made references to Margaret Thatcher and Katie Hopkins when asked if they knew of any feminists. In cases such as these I found myself biting my tongue as the purpose of my research was not to educate, but to listen. I also did not want to place myself in a position of authority on the subject and impose myself as being in a position of power over my participants based on knowledge of feminism.

### *9.3.2 Functional reflexivity: considering the benefits and limitations of the chosen methodology*

I will now engage in a functional reflexive discussion in which I will consider the benefits and the limitations of my methodological approach in Studies 1, 2, and 3. I will do this by considering what may remain unexplored because of the sampling for these studies and how my findings may have been different if I had gathered my data from somewhere else. I will also discuss any problems I encountered during the data collection process and what I may do differently next time to address these problems.

When sampling for the media text studies, I encountered a few problems. I had initially planned to sample from five different monthly women's magazines and five different feminist zines in the months of March, April, and May in 2011 (so three issues per magazine and zine would be sampled). While there were no issues sampling the women's magazines, I found some issues with collecting the zines. Between the time of writing the proposal for this research project and getting ready to sample the media, I discovered that several feminist zines had

folded (such as *Subtext*, *Fat Quarter* and *Uplift*) making sampling problematic. Some of the zines had ceased publication, while others such as *Uplift* had converted into blogs. I was also realising that some zines were harder to purchase than others requiring convoluted methods such as contacting the creator of the zine and setting up a PayPal exchange with them. As Kempson (2013, 2014) explains, feminist zines are distributed among subcultural networks and in order to access them an individual would already need to be part of these networks and 'in the know'. This reminded me of Caitlin Moran's (2011) comment in her memoir *How To Be A Woman*, that feminists may have been producing and distributing zines amongst themselves, but what good is that to a teenage girl on a council estate in Wolverhampton? I felt this was a fair point, as I was interested in identifying discourses being made available to young women in feminist media, I felt it needed to be media which was accessible to the average woman, rather than a small select group of 'insiders'. Because of this, I decided to no longer sample feminist zines and instead chose to sample feminist blogs which would be more easily accessible by anyone with an internet connection. However, in reflection of the findings from Study 3, this issue of availability could also be argued to apply to the blogs. When asked if they read feminist blogs, the majority of the participants stated they were unaware of any feminist blogs at all and would not know how to find any if they were interested in reading them.

The blogs were also not without their own problems in relation to sampling and data collection. Finding five feminist blogs with enough content to sample proved tricky as unlike printed magazines which are regularly published, blogs are updated sporadically and with articles of irregular length. There was also an issue in regards to stability, with some blogs 'disappearing' from the Internet during the sampling process or blogs being modified with articles being removed. To counter these problems, I extended the date range I sampled from by three months (to cover December 2010 through to May 2011), though I still found some difficulty in collecting enough data from the blogs in that some blogs produced relatively short articles in comparison to others. In the end I did manage to gather enough data from the blogs, though this ultimately involved more work than collecting data from the magazines.

Since I sampled and analysed articles from five different feminist blogs, two have closed down (*FemAcadem* and *Uplift*), one has not been updated since 2011

(*Feminazery*) and another has been modified and changed with articles being re-uploaded (*Mookychick*). What this means ultimately is that I captured a 'snapshot' of feminist blog activity in the early 2010s, some of which is now gone, seemingly forever. Some pages can still be accessed using the Internet archive site *The Wayback Machine* but this is only possible if you already know the exact URL of the website you are looking for. This reminds me of a concern raised by Renni Eddo-Lodge at the Psychology Of Women Section's<sup>27</sup> *Social Media & Feminism* symposium held on International Women's Day in March 2015. Eddo-Lodge talked about how some of the 'best conversations' taking place between feminists online are being lost as they are not being archived. Eddo-Lodge highlighted how bell hooks does not engage with the Internet as a platform for her feminism as she wants her work to 'last'. As Eddo-Lodge notes, we can currently look back at early feminist work in archives such as the Women's Library in London and Feminist Archive North in Leeds, but will the same be said about women in 2070 searching for resources and conversations from the feminist movement in the early twenty-first century? She was concerned that perhaps even in ten years' time there will be no evidence of feminism's existence during this period because nothing has been archived. Eddo-Lodge suggests that feminism needs a more solid platform or place to archive these conversations because when people migrate to new social media, the old forms of social media become forgotten and disappear or change (such as *MySpace*). As my own experiences with accessing feminist blogs has shown, Eddo-Lodge's (2015) concerns should hold some currency among the feminist movement. Given how some of these feminist blogs were only active for relatively short periods of time, there is the possibility they were not accessed by many people. This could mean I may have overestimated the extent to which they are likely to have been accessed by young women when I originally chose to sample from them.

There are also other issues with internet-based research. For instance, different forms of social media have fallen in and out of popularity since the late 1990s and some examples (such as Facebook) raises ethical and privacy issues due to these being password protected and/or requiring you to be connected to an individual user in order to see their space (such as a profile or feed). Even when

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<sup>27</sup> The Psychology of Women Section is a section based in the British Psychological Society.

sampling feminist blogs, I had to keep privacy issues in mind. For example, one or two of the blogs I came across, while not password protected had rules posted on them stating they did not give any 'outsiders' permission to use the articles they had posted.

As well as practicalities in relation to sampling for the two media-text studies, I will take a moment here to reflect upon some other points regarding sampling and analysis. In relation to the magazine sample (consisting of *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Red*, and *Company*), I had decided to sample from monthly magazines rather than weekly magazines due to the tendency for weekly magazines (such as *Grazia*, *Closer*, *Now*, *Reveal*, and *Heat*) to have much shorter articles and considered that monthly magazines with their longer articles would provide richer data. At the time I was beginning to consider sampling for Study 1, I had not considered that monthly women's magazines tend to target different readers than weekly women's magazines, particularly in terms of socio-economic status. When I later moved onto analysing and writing up my findings from Study 1, I noticed the profoundly aspirational tone of the magazines (such as a focus on gap years, career networks and the 'dream job') and how 'middle-classed' the dataset is in terms of the values and assumptions found within. I recognise that this may reflect my sampling choices and may also have shaped the discourses around gender and feminism that were identified. It is possible that if I had sampled weekly magazines instead, I may have identified a very different set of discourses being made available by the media to women. In relation to the feminist blogs I analysed, due to my own position as a feminist I initially found it difficult to be critical of the feminist blogs. At first I found it difficult to look beyond the surface level of the dataset and critically engage with aspects which might be problematic. For example, when I began analysing the data I was naïvely disappointed by the extent to which an individualist discursive pattern could be identified across the feminist blogs.

Another point I feel worth reflecting on is how my inexperience with using focus groups as a data collection method may have had some influence on the shape of my findings. My prior experience was with conducting in-depth interviews using a semi-structured format. I do feel that the skills I developed from conducting one-on-one interviews, as well as the reading I did around the use of focus groups, gave me good grounding for conducting focus groups of my own. When I

was moderating the mini-focus groups, I did not encounter any problems such as participants being silent for extended periods, feeling awkward or being resistant. I found moderating the mini-focus groups to be an enjoyable experience and the participants appeared to as well. As I discussed earlier in relation to personal reflexivity, I felt it was important to ask more broad and open questions, allowing participants the space to respond. However, this approach meant I found myself not wanting to interrupt participants when they were in the flow of what they were saying, and sometimes this meant I found it hard to interject when I wanted to probe deeper in relation to a particular aspect of something they said. This sometimes resulted in conversations wandering off topic (in particular with groups, 1, 4 and 6). Other times in such cases I did not want to interrupt because the participant was sharing a particularly emotional experience (such as from their past) that I got the impression was important to them and wanted to respect that they felt able to share this story in front of myself and other women. Another point I noticed in relation to this was that while I was conducting the later mini-focus groups, I was also transcribing the earlier ones. This meant some recurring topics became apparent to me during the transcription process and I found myself probing participants on these more in the last two groups. For example, further exploring how participants relate to social media like Twitter and Facebook and the comparisons they made between these and other forms of media (such as magazines and blogs). It would have been interesting to have been able to go back to the earlier groups and ask them more questions in relation to these topics. While I did ask all of the groups about whether and why they read magazines and blogs, I wish I had probed the earlier groups further on this, as some interesting discussions came up in relation to social media in the later groups. It might then be a good idea to conduct repeated discussions with the same mini-focus groups over a period of time. This way, subsequent discussions could be informed by the emerging analysis.

When sampling for the mini-focus groups, I used a mixture of opportunity sampling and snowball sampling. Through this approach my sample consisted of undergraduate students (mostly, but not all were psychology students), teacher trainees, postgraduate researchers, stay-at-home mothers, and women from a variety of occupations (including business, care and education). One issue with snowball sampling is related to how participants bring along other women they know to take part in the study which means before the discussion starts I do not

necessarily know demographic details of some of my sample until we sit down for the group discussion. This resulted in a few more students being recruited than I intended, in particular postgraduate ones. Still, I did manage to recruit many women who are not students. At least two participants have not been university educated and instead had studied vocational courses in further educational settings. As most of my participants have studied in higher education, this may have influenced the shape of my findings. One of the discourses which was most heavily drawn upon by the participants constructed feminism as no longer relevant in the UK, and that only women in other countries are oppressed. This does raise a question as to whether less privileged participants might have been less likely to draw upon this discourse.

My sample was also predominantly white (the exceptions were one woman who was of South Asian heritage (Pakistani) and another woman of African-Caribbean heritage) which may have in part occurred due to using snowball sampling. It would have been interesting to have interviewed women from other backgrounds such as those who had not experienced post-compulsory education, and/or women with different ethnic backgrounds. On reflection, it is possible that one of my recruitment methods – a poster/flyer featuring a white able-bodied woman in a layout reminiscent of the cover of a chick lit book – may have discouraged some women from taking part. It should also be considered that some groups of women may not have been as able to easily participate in such a study due to time constraints (focus groups in particular are not known for their brevity) whether due to work, caring responsibilities or both. As I did not screen my participants for other demographic details such as their socioeconomic status, sexual orientation or religion I cannot say with any certainty how diverse my sample was in regards to those criteria. I only know in cases where participants volunteered information. Three participants described themselves as following the Church of the Latter Day Saints; one participant described herself as genderqueer; and one participant identified herself as bisexual and described how she had experienced homelessness in her late teens. In terms of class, participants in group 6 strongly identified with being working-class; indeed, this group saw class as a more important factor than gender when it came to discussing problems and issues they perceived in modern society. At one point in the discussion the women in this group commented that it would be interesting to



see what women from different social stratum would be discussing if they took part in my study:

Extract 86

Holly

I'd like to...I'd like to know..if...we did this..with a group of...//lower class...I'm not being nasty but//..a group of a lower class of people..or higher class of people and..what they'd actually come..to the conclusion of...then...us if you..do you..cos like their..their theory on it<sup>28</sup> will be totally// different to ours.

(Group 6).

It is interesting that some of my participants showed an interest in what other groups of women would say in my study. There were also comments made by participants in regards to what other age groups of women (such as older women) would discuss. One thing I could do differently in future research would be to follow up my participants at a later date and show them the kinds of themes and discourses which I identified across the groups in a condensed, accessible (and of course anonymised) format and ask them for their thoughts on these patterns. As I noted in the previous section on personal reflexivity, as well as here, many of my participants expressed an interest in hearing other women's thoughts on feminism and women's issues so this could prove to be an interesting investigation in a future study, as while in my study women could hear each other's thoughts within their groups, they had no opportunity to hear the thoughts of women from across other groups.

To return again to the point I made about not screening participants in relation to demographics such as sexual orientation and socioeconomic status, there was more than one reason I chose not to do this. Firstly, because my aims were interested in the ways young women aged 18-30 co-construct discourses relating to gender and feminism, this meant my research was only focused on demographics in relation to gender and age. Beyond these two criteria I was not looking for women from a specific class, religion, sexual orientation or ethnic background. Secondly, as I was keen to make the group discussions a safe and welcoming environment, I did not feel it was appropriate to direct questions about

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<sup>28</sup> What 'it' is being referred to by Holly here is not entirely clear. In the conversation immediately before this comment, the participants were discussing paternity leave and gender division in relation to domestic chores. After Holly's comment, other participants discussed how upper-class women 'marry into money'.

class or sexual orientation, especially as I would be asking participants in a group situation (many participants arrived to the group discussions together, rather than individually). Perhaps in future I should consider a method for confidentially eliciting such information such as asking participants to fill in anonymous forms before the discussions. However, I feel the need to reflect a little deeper here in relation to how my focus on the social category of gender may have impacted on my data collection and analysis.

As the aims of this research project was centred around gender, this influenced the design of the discussion schedule, and in turn meant I was not asking participants anything specific relating to other social categories such as class or ethnicity. Perhaps this has resulted in my data collection and analysis occluding differences between women in relation to such categories due to my being so focused on exploring the social category of gender. Reflecting back, this becomes apparent to me in particular in relation to Group 6, the participants of which frequently resisted discussions centred around gender (Holly: ...“well..does it matter whether it’s a woman or a man who does it...I don’t care//...and I think there’ll be a lot of people out there now..who are the same...”), and shifted the focus towards issues around class, particularly in terms of taxes, benefits, and housing. Though I would argue even discussion around class was gendered in nature. The women in Group 6 strongly identified as working class and constructed their families (both in the past and the present) as being ‘grafters’ (i.e. a person who works hard to put food on the family table). Tia suggests that because their parents were all ‘grafters’, this is maybe why some of them are currently in relationships with men who are also positioned as ‘grafters’: “I suppose that..that’s probably...maybe why...maybe me and you have got with the people that we have got with..because...that’s what we’re used to...our dads grafted so..we’ve got a grafter”. Tia on different occasions stated that she could not be in a relationship with a man who is unemployed and/or been university educated: “you don’t want to be supporting a man”. This sentiment is supported by Holly who says: “previous people I’ve been with...have always had to have a job...and their own stuff...cos...to me it’d be wrong..to go out with somebody who hadn’t got anything”. Not only did these participants position themselves as working class, they also frequently positioned themselves in relation to the unemployed, and again this was through a gendered lens via references to teenage mothers on benefits. Unemployed women were labelled variously as

'council housers' and 'council estaters' and were frequently constructed as people who take from the economy without giving anything back: "they're not paying their taxes so they're not actually...benefitting// in the..the economy" (Claudia, Group 6). Such discussion, adopted an 'Us and Them' rhetoric whereby unemployed women were constructed as being relatively more affluent than working class women (signalled via references to expensive trips to theme parks, and owning brand name consumer goods). This echoes the 'strivers versus skivers' rhetoric deployed by the media and the then Conservative-dominated Coalition government (2010-2015), which as Dorey (2014) and Jones (2014) both argue, serves to encourage 'working families' to believe that their 'hard earned taxes' are being given away to those claiming welfare support. As Dorey notes, a game of 'divide and rule' is being played here.

As part of my analysis and subsequent write-up of findings I focused on the dominant discursive patterns identified in the data, which meant that patterns which I did not identify as occurring across the dataset were dropped during the part of the analysis where discourses were refined, merged, and/or split up. This means nuances in differences between the women taking part in the group discussions such as the example above were not focused upon. However, it should also not be overlooked that the sample for Study 3 was relatively homogenous and this may have implications in regards to the study's limitations. Due to the homogeneity of the sample, this may mean the discursive patterns identified may not be representative to all women in contemporary Britain. Had more women from groups not represented here been involved (such as women with disabilities), there may have been more resistance to discourses around individualism and the 'othering' of women from Muslim countries.

By not screening participants in relation to social categories other than gender, and subsequently not targeting questions during the mini-focus groups in relation to these categories, I may have eroded my attention to the intertwining of different social categories within the lived contexts of the participants. As Staunaes (2003) observes, the theoretical demand of intersectionality is to read social categories simultaneously, though it is very difficult to navigate and negotiate these at the same time). Crafter (2011) discusses how British white women (including herself) tend to view themselves as 'cultureless', rendering the social category of ethnicity invisible. As a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied,

university educated woman (albeit from a working class background), I find it easier, like Crafter to view myself as a gender-mediated being than an ethnic-mediated being. Contrariwise, I also felt concerns in relation to exoticising 'the Other'. While I may be linked with my participants in terms of gender, there were other dimensions which separated us, and part of me felt uncertain whether I was 'qualified' to dissect and analyse issues of concern to women who had experienced layers of oppression and discrimination I had not experienced or lived myself. I am also wary of slipping into the territory of treating a particular group of women (i.e. women of colour) as a unitary, monolithic entity, thereby overlooking differences within that group.

### *9.3.3 Disciplinary reflexivity: implications of the research and consideration of the thesis' contribution to feminist literature*

When I first wrote the proposal for this project, back around April 2009, feminism, according to mainstream media was 'dead'. We were given the impression that we were now living in an era of postfeminism and that young women saw feminism as irrelevant and out-dated. This is something newspapers and magazines have been arguing since the 1990s. As I have noted in this thesis before, in 1998 the front cover of *TIME* magazine had the headline 'Is feminism dead?' accompanied by an article contending that feminism had become celebrity-obsessed. In October 2015, the front cover of *The Spectator* ran the following headline: 'The End of Feminism. The battle's won, says Emily Hill. It's time to move on'. This is accompanied by a colourful image of a suffragist holding a 'Votes for Women' banner, looking on in disgust at a modern 'angry' feminist bellowing at the top of her lungs, cheeks as red as her spray-painted message: 'All Men are Scum!'. Occasionally the 'feminism is dead' headlines have been switched out with headlines declaring 'feminism needs a makeover', usually accompanied by advertisers and marketers being drafted in to help 'rebrand' feminism.

It has been argued that feminist responses to these claims have generally been polarised, with many feminist writers adopting one of two positions, one which is pessimistic about the current state of feminism and one which is optimistic of current feminist activism (Dean, 2010). On the pessimistic side, there are those

who draw upon the 'decline of feminism' narrative and suggest there is no longer a feminist movement and that women are unable to show overt support for feminism and so must repudiate it (McRobbie, 2000, 2004, 2009). There are also those who contend that contemporary feminism is depoliticised and self-celebratory, with too much focus on 'choice' and the 'power' of consumerism (Power, 2009; Ferguson, 2011; Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). On the optimistic side, there are those who see contemporary feminism as a vibrant movement, marked by a resurgence of activism (Mackay, 2011, 2015; Redfern & Aune, 2010), which some writers have dubbed as the 'fourth wave' of feminism (Cochrane, 2013). I feel that this (over)celebratory side was best epitomised by Cochrane, who in the Guardian declared that "As 2013 unfolded, it became impossible to ignore the rumble of feminist campaigners, up and down the country" (Cochrane, 2013, p. 1). The reason I refer to this as being over-celebratory in tone is because when asking the young women taking part in the mini-focus groups for Study 3, the majority expressed their complete lack of awareness of any current feminist campaigns. The only ones which were referred to were SlutWalk (by group 2) and Everyday Sexism (by group 3). Indeed, many of my participants drew upon a discourse I called "what is feminism for? The war is won", named so because not only did participants situate feminism as being located in the past (as a movement that has been and gone), they also talked about how they did not know what contemporary feminism is about, what its aims are, what it does, and how it campaigns. Some participants said they would not know where to find feminism nor how to research it, while others argued that because they have never needed to know about feminism before, they never will and so will never research it. I would suggest my findings here imply there is potentially a lack of political literacy among some young women (or at least the ones included in the research sample). This point I felt was further compounded by how many of the participants expressed their disinterest in politics such as can be seen in the exchange below:

Extract 88

Interviewer

How do you feel about politics in general?

Fay

I think a lot of it's...stupid// sometimes.

Catherine

//I find it confusing.

Isabella  
Find it very boring.

[mu Yeah].

[u Hmm].

Interviewer  
So why is it confusing?

Anna  
Cos everyone's got all these different opinions but then they all overlap.

Interviewer  
Yeah/.

Fay  
/It just never makes sense.

Anna  
Yeah.

Isabella  
It all seems so contradictory/.  
(Group 1).

Similar comments were made in other groups, as well as comments regarding the trustworthiness of politicians and how participants felt politics did not relate to them or address their interests or needs. This lack of interest in not only feminism and women's issues but also politics in general I feel is concerning. While feminists such as Cochrane (2013) proclaim that contemporary feminism cannot be ignored, my findings appear to indicate a disconnect here. It would seem that the concern of feminist writers such as Power (2009), Mackay (2015) and Kiraly and Tyler (2015) that the feminist movement itself has been deploying the rhetoric of 'choice' and 'consumerism as empowering' in recent years to the detriment of feminist politics may not be without foundation. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of my key findings was that participants adopted a 'can do girl' subjectivity and drew upon postfeminist discourse (as constituted by individualism) to put forward individualised solutions to problems of gender equality. Among my sample, there was a lack of acknowledgement of structural constraints as being the root of women's issues, and similarly, discourse around feminist politics was absent (only those participants who self-defined as feminist from groups 4 and 7 were the exception here). I also argue that the participants'

constructions of feminist blogs is interesting in itself. As I already discussed earlier, the majority of participants were unaware of the existence of feminist blogs. Those few participants who had come across feminist blogs criticised them for a variety of reasons. Some women criticised them for being poorly designed (“don’t care what your content is//...it’s..yeah...if it’s badly written..if it looks like shit...I’m not doing it..I’m just not interested” – Gwen, Group 7) and lack of editing (“Full of grammatical errors” – Nina, Group 7). Feminist blogs were also criticised for their content, which was deemed as not being relatable (“I think...you read stuff what’s closer to ya//...what means more to you..or//...yeah// or...people you might know...or..I think that’s what you’re more interested in//...people you might know or something what means something to you...and the rest of it’s just...shit” – Holly, Group 5), or critical enough (“I just find them trivial..I just don’t think that they’re really that sophisticated in what they talk about” - Sandra, Group 4). These are all interesting points and ones perhaps worthy of attention and debate in the feminist movement. I feel there is a gap here between proclamations of contemporary feminism being ‘impossible to ignore’ and the lack of awareness or even interest among the women in my study. I would argue there is a concern here that feminist media is not reaching women who do not already self-identify as feminist. Indeed, one participant, Anna talked about how on social media sites (“a lot of stuff comes up on social media and things...//so that’s the way it gets...spread to our generation”) are the main channels for women her age (19) to find out about news and events. However, Anna put forward that feminism is not something which is showing up on social media and fellow group members Zoe and Catherine agreed with this claim:

#### Extract 89

Anna

Don’t really watch the news or anything to see...like something// that’s...on there...but then you’d expect it to come up on like Twitter or Facebook...like “oh my god there’s a big protest or something”..you’d expect...//cos you get things that come up on Twitter that you don’t follow...like promoted things and stuff..so you...notice something.  
(Group 1).

This reminds me of Billig’s (2013) discussion around ‘mass culture’ today. He suggests the term is a misnomer, as rather than media<sup>29</sup> being broadcast to a

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<sup>29</sup> To clarify, by ‘media’, what is being referred to can cover more than just television, but also music, films, video games, books, and other forms of entertainment.

mass audience as in previous decades, media is now delivered via specialist channels and targeting specific audience segments. The result of this is there is more variety available than ever before, but people have become narrower in what they are watching/reading/playing. Becker (1999) emphasises how people can have what they want and avoid anything they do not want, and that people need to make a special effort in order to encounter any kind of variety. Becker draws attention to how in the late twentieth century, media outlets (such as television, radio, and magazines) were making it easier for consumers to avoid material which is unfamiliar to them. He argues that this has been further exacerbated with the development of the Internet and cable television. According to Becker, this means people are developing a way of living within their own bubble of information and experiences, while not encountering the experiences of others. There is a potential for people to widen their tastes thanks to the growth in media technology and the Internet, but instead technology is helping people to narrow their experiences. This is something touched upon by Gwen: "If your friends aren't engaging in it...//if you don't show that interest..in..it...Facebook's algorithms are not going to show you that kind of stuff" (Group 7). Certainly looking back at Anna's comment that feminism is not showing up on social media, there does appear to be a case of feminism not being visible to everyone, even if the content is being created and put 'out there'.

Internet activist Eli Pariser (2012) explains this as a phenomenon he coined 'the filter bubble'. The filter bubble is a phenomenon which has developed through increasing 'personalisation' of the Internet and media due to advances in technology. For example, search engines tailoring search results based on a user's browsing history. This means, when different users search for the same term on a search engine such as *Google*, they will no longer see the same results. According to Pariser, up until December 2009, *Google*'s 'Page Rank' algorithm would filter results in the order deemed most 'authoritative' based on other page's links; whereas now *Google* will filter results based on what the algorithm determines is 'best' for a particular person. The concern here is this can lead to a 'distortion problem' whereby various websites, search engines, and social media platforms are only showing material (such as news stories) which a person has already shown a prior interest in. This can also result in a person not being shown material which features alternative viewpoints, such as competing political viewpoints or the feminist movement (Pariser, 2012).



As I highlighted earlier, many of the women in my study expressed they did not know anything about modern feminism nor how to access it and this problem appears to be further compounded by feminist media (or at least blogs and newspaper articles) being seen as difficult to relate to, as trivial, and badly written. As Negra (2013) argues, feminism needs to get its message out into the public realm so it can be accessed by women, as otherwise the material they will access instead will be littered with postfeminist discourse relating to choice, self-branding, and individualism. There is some tension here though, as feminists such as Kiraly and Tyler (2015) have raised concerns about 'feminism-lite' being too apolitical and lacking in intellectual rigour, theory and sophistication, but at the same time, my mini-focus group participants suggested that feminism is inaccessible and difficult to relate to or even understand. This is a difficult road to navigate, and one I would suggest feminism treads carefully, as I highlighted in chapter 2, there have been many attempts in recent years to 'rebrand' feminism and make it more appealing and accessible. However, this has often resulted in feminism having its rougher edges smoothed off in order to make it more palatable (e.g. Walter, 1999; Valenti, 2007), and any political element being watered down to simply being about consumer choice (Vernon, 2015; Levenson, 2009). This is an issue of content, though I argue that it is the mode of transmission which needs to be considered by feminists, particularly given cases such as Anna (Group 1) not seeing examples of feminist activity on social media.

Aside from the issue of the 'filter bubble' or echo chamber effect whereby algorithms only show what people are already interested in and/or looking for, I would also suggest that the sheer volume of material available via mediums such as the Internet may also be a contributing factor. Some of my participants talked about how the amount of content can be overwhelming: ("I don't look at things that...I don't want to look at [...]I'll ig..I'll ig..I'll ignore..quite a bit of stuff...erm...just cos I don't..it is a bit in your face...and I suppose it could feel overwhelming" – Ashley, Group 7). My concern here is that feminism is having to compete with an overwhelming volume of Internet traffic in order to be heard and this will make disseminating messages such as about feminist causes more difficult and more likely to 'get lost in the noise'. As Billig (2013) observes, there is significantly more media, more entertainment and more books being made available for people to engage with and this is resulting in a narrowing of tastes. My concern

here is that the Internet can keep people in silos, unaware of what is going on in other circles (outside of our own interests, causes, etc). I argue it is important for us as feminists to think about how we use the Internet, and not just assume that because we are putting the content out there that it is being seen. I would also suggest it is important for further investigation to find out why some young women appear not to go looking for feminism at all. As I already discussed in chapter 7 in relation to 'the war is won' discourse, many of my participants said they did not know how to find out information about feminism, but I contest this as it seems to be at odds with the ease of finding information using search engines such as *Google*. Especially given, several of my participants were at the time this study conducted, university undergraduates who would be developing skills in Information Technology [IT] and literature searching.

There is a further implication of the 'feminism is inaccessible' discourse I feel is important to touch on here. As I discussed in chapter 7, many of my participants felt unable to claim a feminist subjectivity as they did not know enough about feminism and were concerned they did not do anything particularly feminist (i.e. meet some kind of 'feminist criteria'). This finding seems to imply that the participants were aware of the 'being feminist enough' discourse (which I identified in the blogs dataset for Study 2) and were positioning themselves within that as 'not feminist enough'. When conducting the mini-focus groups for Study 3, I did mention to participants that I had done a previous study on feminist blogs, but did not go into any detail explaining what I found nor summarised any of the discourses identified. This is interesting, as this means the mini-focus group participants referred to the 'being feminist enough' discourse independently and without any prompting for me, indicating that this is quite a powerful discourse. This I feel, could warrant further investigation into just how far the 'being feminist enough' discourse has permeated outside feminist circles (i.e. among women in general) and where besides feminist blogs this discourse is being made available. I would also propose that any further research into this could also be extended to explore how women who do identify with feminism position themselves in relation to this discourse.

To return briefly to Emily Hill's *Spectator* article. I could not help but notice that many of the discourses she draws upon sound similar to the ones the women taking part in my third study deployed. In the space of one article Hill dismisses

contemporary feminism as navel-gazing, middle-class and petty. Over the course of the article Hill accuses feminism of judging working-class women's choices, ignoring the 'real' gender equality problem which is that 'poor boys' are losing out in education and employment to girls, and feminists 'over-reacting to trivial issues' when they should be more concerned about 'women abroad'. Further to this, I would argue that Hill is drawing upon individualist discourse when she suggests that Western feminists stop 'moaning' and 'enjoy the spoils' of the women's movement "I looked to that real feminist icon Margaret Thatcher as objective proof that I could get wherever the hell I wanted in life, provided I sharpened my wits and gave it my all" (Hill. 2015, p. 1). Oddly, Hill's article opens by implying it is newspapers who are 'wrongly' putting forward the 'notion' that women are still oppressed, whereas I would argue to the contrary, that it is the newspapers who usually proclaim that 'the war is won'! As discussed earlier, the implications of my findings for feminism are arguably quite depressing. In the same way as Hill is doing here, my participants drew upon postfeminist discourses which emphasised the privilege of 'choice' (accompanied by the implication that feminists who critique women's choices are 'bad' and 'judgemental') and the notion that it is men who are the 'true victims' in modern society, rather than women. This latter point of how many of my participants stated they were more concerned about the future of men than they were for women raises another concern. As discussed in the previous chapter, one of my key findings related to a curious 'entanglement' of women placing emphasis on the need for equality to be gender neutral (as exemplified by suggestions that the term feminism be replaced with terms such as: equal rights, equalityism and/or human rights), while at the same time arguing that it is men who are 'really' experiencing discrimination and thereby suffering. This could be interpreted as being reflective of discourse around feminism (such as can be found in the media) which constructs feminism as anti-men and as hostile/aggressive. The extent to which such discourse is accepted by women is worrying as it legitimises the arguments made by men's rights activists (such as 'Fathers for Justice' and 'Justice for Men & Boys') and justifies the hostility towards feminists as can be found in public and online spaces.

I will now consider where my research fits within feminist literature. The topic of young women's identification with and attitudes towards feminism goes back a long way. There have been various quantitative-based studies on the subject

over the years (e.g. McCabe, 2005; Robnett, 2012; Cichoka et al., 2013) which focused on investigating how factors such as demographics (including education level and political affiliation) or attitudes can act as 'predictors' of levels of feminist identification. As I discussed earlier when engaging in personal reflexivity, I have found such mainstream studies to be too reductionist in their approach, simplifying what I would argue is a complex topic. More recently, Christina Scharff (2012) conducted a qualitative study where she conducted individual interviews with 40 British and German women aged 18-35. Scharff was interested in finding out why young women repudiate feminism, and interestingly some of her findings are strikingly similar to my own. Like myself, Scharff found her participants drawing upon individualist discourses and the 'othering' of Muslim women. Scharff (2011b, 2012) highlights how in her research, participants did not offer any critical or political analysis of gender relations. Instead, participants placed emphasis on individualised solutions to what they saw as personal problems. However, there are some differences in our findings. For instance, Scharff found many of her participants repudiated feminism on the basis of it being seen as "unfeminine, man-hating and lesbian" (2012, p. 69) with many of her participants drawing upon stereotypes of 'hairy-legged', lesbians 'in dungarees'. In contrast, my participants acknowledged these stereotypes existed, but would then refute them:

Extract 90

Mel

There is like..the stereotype that all feminists hate men..and I think that's...you know...it's not really...it's not true at all.

[u It's not].

Mel

From what I know anyway.  
(Group 2).

In her work Scharff (2012) drew upon Ahmed's (2004) notions of 'sticky' stereotypes or affects in order to provide an explanation of what she saw as the 'spectre' of the feminist 'haunting' her participants' discussions, in particular the figure of the 'unfeminine, man-hating, lesbian' feminist and how young women would invoke this subject (both directly and indirectly) in order to distance themselves from feminism. Scharff saw heterosexist constructions of the 'homosexual feminist' as being a prominent feature in her data. This contrasts

with my findings, as already noted, I did not identify the subject of the 'lesbian feminist' haunting the data. Instead, I found a strong emphasis on a gender-blind or gender neutral approach to equality, with the need to analyse issues through a gendered lens being dismissed as 'inequitable'. In particular, my participants seemed to be at great pains to show how they felt men needed to be included in discussions of equality and that the 'needs of men' should be considered just as much, if not more so, than women's needs.

To consider where my research fits into feminism more broadly, I will return to the 'is feminism dead?' debate. In her introduction to a 2011 issue of *Feminist Media Studies*, Catharine Lumby (2011) expressed her frustration at how much attention the 'is feminism dead?' debate received in the 2000s, noting how she had been invited to speak at panels on this topic a total of fourteen times across the decade. Whenever I attended feminist conferences, symposiums and workshops myself over the course of the last several years I encountered many feminists who expressed interest in my study suggesting this topic continues to attract interest. There was a time when I was concerned my research could not be considered as fulfilling feminist objectives as it was not focused on studying or challenging the more 'hard hitting' issues such as violence against women, institutionalised sexism and discrimination or body issues (such as reproductive choice, body image, and eating disorders). After going through the process of talking to and listening to young women and analysing their discussions, I feel that while my research does not address heavier issues such as violence against women or female genital mutilation, it does fulfil feminist objectives.

In formulating their new seven demands of the feminist movement, Redfern and Aune (2010) acknowledged that their seventh demand of 'feminism reclaimed', may sound odd in comparison to the previous six (which were focused on the afore mentioned 'hard hitting' issues among others such as those relating to religion). However, they argued that many of the feminists they surveyed felt the issue of why so many women do not identify as a feminist, as well as how the movement is misunderstood and misrepresented are key concerns. Redfern and Aune describe this demand as being about reclaiming the feminist label as a 'badge of honour' and of feminism as being a viable theory, and sum it up as an eagerness to ensure that more people (especially young people) are attracted to and are empowered by feminism. I argue that my research falls under the banner

of this seventh demand of feminism (feminism reclaimed) as it is concerned with the issue of why young women do not identify with feminism. My research highlights that feminism does not appear to be accessible to women because they are simply not encountering it in their everyday lives, and if they do encounter feminism, do not recognise it as such. This is because feminism does not correspond with widely accepted cultural ideas about what feminism is. Also, not only is feminist discourse found to be absent, but so is any critique of structural, economic or politically-based constraints in the lives of people.

#### **9.4 Original contribution to knowledge and concluding remarks**

Before concluding this thesis, I am now going to turn my attention to consideration of this thesis' original contribution and the implications of my findings.

When starting out this research project, I was interested in why some young women did not seem to see feminism as being relevant to their lives and why some young women rejected the label. Early work on the subject (such as Griffin, 1989; Green, 1995) explored underpinning reasons for women's (dis)identification with feminism. Griffin suggested that (dis)identification could be linked to the predominantly negative representations of feminism found in the media, as well as the threat of men labelling them as 'women's libbers'. Aapola, Gonick, and Harris (2004) note how young women tend to be constructed by the media and academics in three specific ways: 1) as repudiating a feminist subjectivity, 2) as apolitical and apathetic, and 3) as interpreting the world through an individualistic lens. I agree with their sentiment that many assumptions have been made about young women's relationship with feminism. One such example, as Griffin (2001) observes is that contemporary discussions tend to position 'young women' and 'feminism' as being entirely separate and distinct from one another. I argue that such binaries are too simplistic to account for young women's relationship with feminism. I sought to build on previous research by conducting mini-focus groups with young women in order to examine how discourses around feminism are co-constructed, as well as to identify which discourses from media (specifically women's magazines and feminist blogs) women reproduced in their talk.

Through my analysis, I have found that the issue is more complicated than women simply repudiating feminism. While I did find evidence of participants drawing upon a discourse of feminism as being irrelevant and redundant, I also found evidence of two other discourses interacting in participants' talk. One of these was a discourse of postfeminism as constituted by individualised notions of personal choice, individualised responsibility, and the 'can-do girl'. This is a discourse which (as with the discourse of feminism as irrelevant) has been identified in interview studies with young women (e.g. Scharff, 2010; Sharpe, 2001). In discussing her own research with young women, Jowett (2004) relates how young women in the late 1990s grew up with British cultural imagery at the turn of the century which was filled with neoliberal discourse (centred around notions of aspiration, achievement, and optimism), fuelled by a combination of the then New Labour government's futuristic rhetoric and reflective celebration associated with the millennium. This discourse then impacted upon these young women's assessments of feminism, and resulting in the disinvestment of feminism as a relevant political movement for the twenty-first century. My findings of women deploying postfeminist discourse as constituted by individualist notions would indeed suggest this. This discourse was apparent in not only the women's magazines I analysed, but also the feminist blogs, and was reproduced by the young women in the group discussions. I feel this finding is particularly important given growing arguments that the ideology of neoliberalism is in decline (e.g. Jacques, 2016) due to factors such as the economic recession which began in 2008. This is something which has been put forward to me by my peers (such as those I have met at academic conferences). This was often accompanied by the suggestion that the young women who will take part in my research will not be likely to draw upon individualist discourse due to the combined impact of the recession and the Conservative party coming into power again in 2010. However, my mini-focus groups took place six years after the recession and four years after the start of the (then) Conservative-Democrat government, and still the discourse of individualism formed a central core running through all three of my studies.

In addition, I also found a third discourse (in Study 3) which I argue has not been identified in previous research: a discourse of postfeminism as constituted by backlash notions such as 'what about teh menz'. What I found was that not only was there a strong underlying core of individualism running throughout

participants' talk (and indeed was identified as operating across both the magazine and blog datasets), but there was also an emphasis placed on interpreting the world through a gender-neutral lens. Participants frequently repudiated terms such as 'feminism' and 'women's rights' and instead advocated the adoption of more neutral terms such as 'human rights' and 'equalityism'. What I also found was that while participants deployed a discourse of gender neutrality to advocate a degendering of women's rights issues to being 'human rights', participants were deploying this discourse to suggest that men 'have it bad too' and that attention needs to be paid to men's issues and rights, just as much as women's. I found in participants' talk that this discourse operated to draw attention away from women's issues (such as rape and domestic violence) and refocus it on comparatively trivial issues (such as men being able to wear skirts or play with 'girlie' toys).

Many participants seemed to prefer to look at equality issues through a gender-neutral lens, and some participants felt unable to adopt a feminist subjectivity due to its perceived 'exclusion' of men. Additionally, a feminist subjectivity was constructed as being passive and dependent on support from the state and/or feminist politics. Instead, participants tended to adopt the subject position of the 'can-do girl' which was constructed as having individual agency and as active. I feel that after identifying women as rejecting a feminist subjectivity in favour of subjectivities such as the 'can-do girl' and 'equal rights advocate', one possible direction for further research would be to hone in on what I feel is the key issue identified. That being the question of, how can poststructuralist feminists work with young women to deconstruct and challenge the problematic discourses which are in play around feminism (and drawn upon by the participants in my research)? Given the current climate of hostility towards feminists both in public spaces (such as universities) and online spaces (with feminists in the public eye such as Anita Sarkeesian and Caroline Criado-Perez being targeted with hostility and even death threats), I argue that identifying young women as drawing upon these same discourses (as used by men's rights activists) is an important issue highlighted in my data.



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## **Appendix 1 – Tables relating to Study 1**

*Table 1: Targeted magazine titles and the number of articles sampled from each title.*

<b>Magazines</b>	<b>Issues collected (by date)</b>	<b>Total number of articles sampled</b>
Glamour	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Cosmopolitan	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Marie Claire	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Red	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
Company	March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	6
<b>Total units of meaning collected</b>		<b>30</b>

*Table 3: Articles selected from women's monthly magazines.*

<b>Magazines</b>	<b>Issues</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>Article No. Code</b>
Glamour	March 2011	Are you with him for the right reasons? <i>By Felicity Robinson</i> (pp. 127 – 132).	1
		Smoking – Still a good look? <i>By Hannah Ebelthite</i> (pp. 261 – 266).	2
	April 2011	Make the next 10 years your happiest yet. <i>By Hannah Ebelthite</i> (pp. 148 – 152).	3

		Not to be rude but...are you being an idiot? <i>By Tanya de Grunwald</i> (pp. 165 – 168).	4
	May 2011	Stop the bitch wars! <i>By Sarah Hepola</i> (pp. 77 – 80).	5
		“Marry me or else...” Are ultimatums ever ok? <i>By Gemma Askham</i> (pp. 135 – 138).	6
Cosmopolitan	March 2011	Step into your dream job. <i>By Annabelle Lee</i> (pp. 206 – 208).	7
	April 2011	Beware...the henzilla! <i>By Jacqui Meddings</i> (p. 42).	8
		The third-rate rule. <i>By Rosie Mullender</i> (p. 69).	9
		Which of these boxes have you ticked? <i>By Rosie Mullender and additional reporting by Punam Vyas</i> (pp. 100 – 101).	10
	May 2011	Gimme my money back, bitch! <i>By Katy Brent</i> (pp. 69 – 72).	11
		Is vanity sizing harming our health? <i>By Natalie Blenford</i> (pp. 132 – 134).	12
Marie Claire	March 2011	My gossip-free week. <i>By Naomi Reilly</i> (pp. 141 – 142).	13
		‘Oh my god I’m pregnant! So now what?’ <i>By Lucy Mangan</i> (p. 171).	14
	April 2011	Are we really ready for the return of the bunny girl? <i>By Jenna Good</i> (pp. 148 – 152).	15
		She’s one of the boys & that’s why I can’t stand her! <i>By Jenny Colgan</i> (pp. 185 – 186).	16
	May 2011	Cocktails and contacts: The new way to climb the career ladder. <i>By</i>	17

		<i>Laura Tennant</i> (pp. 117 – 120).	
		All the men I've loved. <i>By Kate Spicer</i> (pp. 141 – 142).	18
Red	March 2011	What's your magic number? <i>By Anna Berkeley</i> (pp. 81 – 84).	19
		Good things come to those who wait... <i>By Eleni Kyriacou</i> (pp. 87 – 88).	20
	April 2011	Wipe that smile off your face. <i>By Bibi van der Zee</i> (pp. 83 – 84).	21
		Biological clock ticking yet? <i>By Corrie Pikul</i> (pp. 103 – 106).	22
	May 2011	In praise of the pit-stop pal. <i>By Bridget Harrison</i> (pp. 81 – 82).	23
		You're fired! ;-) Xxxx <i>By Liz Fraser</i> (p. 124).	24
Company	March 2011	"Who are you calling a lady?" <i>By Jameela</i> (p. 52).	25
		"I'm Gemma, fly me!" <i>By Anna Whitehouse</i> (p. 80).	26
	April 2011	The touchdown comedown. <i>By Stacey Bartlett</i> (pp. 104 – 105).	27
	May 2011	Struggling to keep up with your friend min? <i>By Helen Bownass</i> (pp. 62 – 64).	28
		"I'm in love with a woman - but I'm not gay." <i>By Elle Carr</i> (pp. 69 – 70).	29
		Anyone for a man <u>ban</u> ? <i>By Lena de Casparis</i> (pp. 110 – 111).	30

*Table 5: Women's Interest: lifestyle/fashion ABC figures last six months of 2010  
(all percentages are year on year changes)*

*Source: Press Gazette (2010)*

*Date Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> February 2011*

<b>No.</b>	<b>MAGAZINE</b>	<b>CIRCULATION FIGURE</b>	<b>FREQUENCY</b>
1	Glamour	500,591 -2.9%	Monthly
2	John Lewis Edition	485,139 N/A	Free to in-store customers
3	ASOS.com	451,369 0.3%	Free online magazine
4	Good Housekeeping	443,750 3.2%	Monthly
5	Stylist	424,107 3.3%	Premium weekly (free in selected cities)
6	Cosmopolitan	400,575 -6.9%	Monthly
7	Women & Home	385,800 4.7%	Monthly
8	Look	311,425 -0.5%	Weekly
9	Yours	293,016 3.0%	Fortnightly
10	Prima	268,421 -6.9%	Monthly
11	Marie Claire	265,042 -6.4%	Monthly
12	Candis	247,906 -6.0%	Monthly
13	Red	231,028 2.0%	Monthly
14	Grazia	224,421 -2.3%	Weekly
15	Company	217,491 -9.4%	Monthly
16	Vogue	211,277 0.4%	Monthly
17	Elle (UK)	200,531 2.6%	Monthly
18	More!	188,265 -2.4%	Weekly
19	Instyle UK	180,574 -1.9%	Monthly
20	Easy Living	160,061 -5.9%	Monthly
21	She	144,583 -3.7%	Monthly
22	Essentials	126,379 12.7%	Monthly
23	Psychologies	120,119 -8.2%	Monthly
24	Harpers Bazaar	119,712 8.2%	Monthly
25	Vanity Fair	102,471 0.0%	Monthly
26	Tatler	87,258 1.1%	Monthly
27	Ladies First	36,457 0.1%	Quarterly
28	WM The Women's Magazine	34,278 4.6%	Quarterly
29	U Magazine	27,564 -4.4%	Monthly
30	VIP Magazine	24,113 -10.9%	Monthly
31	Irish Tatler	23,536 -12.4%	Monthly
32	Stellar	21,556 143.1%	Monthly
33	No 1 Magazine	20,074 N/A	Monthly

34	Social & Personal	19,056 16.1%	Monthly
35	Image	19,005 -13.8%	Monthly
36	Prudence	11,290 2.3%	Monthly



## **Appendix 2 – Tables relating to Study 2**

*Table 2: Targeted feminist blogs and the number of articles sampled from each title.*

<b>Blogs</b>	<b>Months articles sampled from</b>	<b>Total number of articles sampled</b>
FemAcadem	December 2010 January 2011 March 2011 April 2011	6
Feminazery	January 2011 February 2011 May 2011	6
The F Word	December 2010 January 2011 February 2011 March 2011 April 2011 May 2011	7
Mookychick	Dates not provided for articles.	7
Uplift	February 2011 March 2011 May 2011	4
<b>Total units of meaning collected</b>		<b>30</b>

*Table 4: Articles selected from feminist blogs.*

<b>Blog</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Articles</b>	<b>Article No.</b>
FemAcadem	9 <sup>th</sup> December 2010	Rape and the Left-Wing Media. <i>By Melaszka.</i>	31
	9 <sup>th</sup> December 2011	Slivers of time or how to screw over the informal jobs market. <i>By andieberry.</i>	32
	5 <sup>th</sup> January	Miss Scarlet in the Billiard Room	33

	2011	with the Patronising Media. <i>By Melaszka.</i>	
	23 <sup>rd</sup> January 2011	Ageism, employment tribunals and autocuties. <i>By Melaszka.</i>	34
	6 <sup>th</sup> March 2011	Breastfeeding, shame & Jessica Valenti. <i>By Suzi.</i>	35
	6 <sup>th</sup> April 2011	Veiled Criticism. <i>By Melaszka.</i>	36
Feminazery	4 <sup>th</sup> January 2011	Prince/ss.	37
	8 <sup>th</sup> January 2011	So there is this horrible little man on Twitter. <i>By V.</i>	38
	13 <sup>th</sup> January 2011	News flash – women not people, do not have feelings. <i>By V.</i>	39
	28 <sup>th</sup> January 2011	Loose Women Is Not A Valid Argument.	40
	22 <sup>nd</sup> February 2011	Lingerie shop to staff: wear make-up or else. <i>By V.</i>	41
	8 <sup>th</sup> May 2011	Marriage, expectation and Pippa Middleton's bum. <i>By Monkeh Labels.</i>	42
The F Word	12 <sup>th</sup> December 2010	Are you feminist enough? <i>By Annika Spalding.</i>	43
	23 <sup>rd</sup> January 2011	Students offer a glimmer of hope. <i>By Lisa Ansell.</i>	44
	25 <sup>th</sup> February 2011	A room of her own. <i>By Bidisha.</i>	45
	9 <sup>th</sup> March	Equal pay and the fight for	46

	2011	equality in the workplace. <i>By Michelle Gordon.</i>	
	13 <sup>th</sup> March 2011	Men and women: are we really worlds apart? <i>By Kitty Sadler.</i>	47
	17 <sup>th</sup> April 2011	Princess Kate's reality TV wedding. <i>By Ray Filar.</i>	48
	14 <sup>th</sup> May 2011	New feature: Fashion and gender. <i>By Jess McCabe.</i>	49
Mookychick		Plus-size? End the abuse. <i>By Catie Deiley.</i>	50
		Sexed up. <i>By NoxxNoctis.</i>	51
		Beauty Baddies. <i>By The Ophelia Complex.</i>	52
		The portrayal of women in the media. <i>By Laura-Jane.</i>	53
		No Label Needed. <i>By Amber Nefertari.</i>	54
		Women and Ambition – a Feminist approach. <i>By Paulina Anastasia.</i>	55
		Reclaiming Feminism. <i>By Michelle Garrett.</i>	56
Uplift	11th February 2011	Winning women writers? That's novel... <i>By Sarah Barnes.</i>	57
	8th February 2011	Romance Is Dead. Long Live Art! <i>By Sarah Barnes.</i>	58
	20th March 2011	Hollering Back – The growing movement against street harassment. <i>Dearbhaile Kitt.</i>	59
	3rd April 2011	Say No to a Crappy Mother's Day! <i>By Sarah Barnes.</i>	60

Table 6: List of UK-based feminist blogs (presented in alphabetical order).

Source: Elliot (2010) *The missing list, Too Much to Say for Myself*. Retrieved from: <https://toomuchtosayformyself.com/2010/09/15/the-missing-list/>

Accessed 18<sup>th</sup> July 2011.

No.	Name	URL	Multiple Authors?	Single Issue?	Local Focus?
1	and all that Chas...	<a href="http://allthatchas.blogspot.com/">http://allthatchas.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
2	Anti-Porn Feminists	<a href="http://antipornfeminists.wordpress.com/">http://antipornfeminists.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes	Yes	
3	Applejackson	<a href="http://applejackson.co.uk/">http://applejackson.co.uk/</a>	No		
4	At Home	<a href="http://ladymccarthy.blogspot.com/">http://ladymccarthy.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
5	Autonomous Radical Feminists	<a href="http://autonomoustradicalfeminists.wordpress.com/">http://autonomoustradicalfeminists.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes	Yes	
6	The Bearded Lady	<a href="http://teebeeell.wordpress.com/">http://teebeeell.wordpress.com/</a>	Unknown – Private blog – members only.		
7	Beyond Feminism	<a href="http://beyondfeminism.wordpress.com/">http://beyondfeminism.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
8	Beyond Retrograde	<a href="http://beyondretrograde.com/">http://beyondretrograde.com/</a>	No		
9	Birmingham Feminists	<a href="http://bhamfems.wordpress.com/">http://bhamfems.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes	No	Yes
10	Black Feminists	<a href="http://blackfeminists.blogspot.com/">http://blackfeminists.blogspot.com/</a>	Yes	No	No
11	Brand New Feminist	<a href="http://graceneedshelp.wordpress.com/">http://graceneedshelp.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
12	Cardiff Feminist Network	<a href="http://feministcardiff.wordpress.com/">http://feministcardiff.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes	No	Yes
13	Cat and Chocolate	<a href="http://catsandchocolate.wordpress.com/">http://catsandchocolate.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
14	Cloblog	<a href="http://cloblog.wordpress.com/">http://cloblog.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
	Crazy Like Us	<a href="http://feministmentalhealthuk.wordpress.com/">http://feministmentalhealthuk.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes	Yes	No
15	Cruella Blog	<a href="http://cruellablog.blogspot.com/">http://cruellablog.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
16	Daily Feminist Action	<a href="http://dailyfeministaction.tumblr.com/">http://dailyfeministaction.tumblr.com/</a>	No		
17	Delilah	<a href="http://delilah-mj.blogspot.com/">http://delilah-mj.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
18	Don't Dance Her Down Boys	<a href="http://dontdanceherdownboys.blogspot.com/">http://dontdanceherdownboys.blogspot.com/</a>	No		

19	Earwicga	<a href="http://earwicga.wordpress.com/">http://earwicga.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
20	Face to the World	<a href="http://facetotheworld.blogspot.com">http://facetotheworld.blogspot.com</a>	Unknown – Private blog – members only.		
21	FemAcadem	<a href="http://www.femacadem.net/">http://www.femacadem.net/</a>	No – has one or two guests posting.		
22	Femblr – A Feminist Tumblr	<a href="http://femblr.tumblr.com/">http://femblr.tumblr.com/</a>	Yes		
23	Feminazery	<a href="http://dmhatingfemisfromhell.blogspot.com/">http://dmhatingfemisfromhell.blogspot.com/</a>	Yes	No	No
24	Feminist Memory	<a href="http://feministmemory.wordpress.com/">http://feministmemory.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
25	F For Philistine	<a href="http://fforphilistine.wordpress.com/">http://fforphilistine.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
26	The F Word	<a href="http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/">http://www.thefword.org.uk/blog/</a>	Yes	No	No
27	Get There Steppin'	<a href="http://gts-kjb.blogspot.com/">http://gts-kjb.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
28	Hangbitch	<a href="http://www.hangbitching.com/">http://www.hangbitching.com/</a>	Unknown – collection of interviews.		
29	Harpymarx	<a href="http://harpymarx.wordpress.com/">http://harpymarx.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
30	Hollaback UK	<a href="http://hollaback-uk.blogspot.com/">http://hollaback-uk.blogspot.com/</a>	Yes – includes messages submitted by readers about their harassment experiences.	Yes	
31	Incurable hippie's musings and rants	<a href="http://incurable-hippie.blogspot.com/">http://incurable-hippie.blogspot.com/</a>	No		

32	It's not a zero sum game	<a href="http://notazerosumgame.blogspot.com/">http://notazerosumgame.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
33	Reversing the jelly baby of the neutron flow	<a href="http://miss-s-b.dreamwidth.org/">http://miss-s-b.dreamwidth.org/</a>	No		
34	Kaite Welsh	<a href="http://www.kaitewelsh.com/blog/">http://www.kaitewelsh.com/blog/</a>	Inactive		
35	Lady Sophia	<a href="http://lady sophia-jilly.blogspot.com/">http://lady sophia-jilly.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
36	LASH Campaign	<a href="http://lashcampaign.org/">http://lashcampaign.org/</a>	Inactive		
37	Lee's Random Blog	<a href="http://www.leechalmers.com/">http://www.leechalmers.com/</a>	No		
38	Liztopia	<a href="http://liztopia.wordpress.com/">http://liztopia.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
39	Lonergrrrl	<a href="http://lonergrrrl.wordpress.com/">http://lonergrrrl.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
40	My Fault, I'm Female	<a href="http://myfaultimfemale.wordpress.com/">http://myfaultimfemale.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes – Messages submitted by readers.	No	No
41	Mookychick	<a href="http://www.mookychick.co.uk/">http://www.mookychick.co.uk/</a>	Yes	Yes	No
42	Noble Savage	<a href="http://noblesavage.me.uk/">http://noblesavage.me.uk/</a>	No		
43	Notes From a Femme	<a href="http://grrrrswell.wordpress.com/">http://grrrrswell.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
44	No to Hooters in the UK	<a href="http://www.nohootersinbristol.blogspot.com/">http://www.nohootersinbristol.blogspot.com/</a>	Yes	Yes	
45	An Open Letter by a Feminist	<a href="http://letterbyafeminist.blogspot.com/">http://letterbyafeminist.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
46	Other Stories	<a href="http://blog.otherstories.co.uk/">http://blog.otherstories.co.uk/</a>	No		
47	Paperhouse	<a href="http://sarahditum.com/">http://sarahditum.com/</a>	No		
48	Parallelexistence	<a href="http://parallelexistence.wordpress.com/">http://parallelexistence.wordpress.com/</a>	Unknown		
49	Penny Red	<a href="http://pennyred.blogspot.com/">http://pennyred.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
50	Philobiblon	<a href="http://philobiblon.co.uk/">http://philobiblon.co.uk/</a>	No		
51	Pink Stinks	<a href="http://pinkstinks.wordpress.com/">http://pinkstinks.wordpress.com/</a>	Yes	Yes	
52	Political Blonde	<a href="http://www.politicalblonde.com/">http://www.politicalblonde.com/</a>	No		
53	Posie Rider	<a href="http://ladiesalone.blogspot.com/">http://ladiesalone.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
54	Progressive Women	<a href="http://www.progressivewomen.org.uk/">http://www.progressivewomen.org.uk/</a>	Yes	Yes	
55	Provincial Intrigue	<a href="http://provincialintrigue.blogspot.com/">http://provincialintrigue.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
56	Rarely Wears Lipstick	<a href="http://www.lori-smith.co.uk/">http://www.lori-smith.co.uk/</a>	No		

57	Rebel Raising	<a href="http://rebelraising.wordpress.com/">http://rebelraising.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
58	Rmott62	<a href="http://rmott62.wordpress.com/">http://rmott62.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
59	A Rye View	<a href="http://julietomlin.wordpress.com/">http://julietomlin.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
60	Shut Up, Sit Down	<a href="http://shutupsitdown.co.uk/">http://shutupsitdown.co.uk/</a>	No		
61	Sian and Crooked Rib	<a href="http://sianandcrookedrib.blogspot.com/">http://sianandcrookedrib.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
62	Stroppyblog	<a href="http://stroppyblog.blogspot.com/">http://stroppyblog.blogspot.com/</a>	Yes	No	No
63	Subtext	<a href="http://www.subtextmagazine.co.uk/">http://www.subtextmagazine.co.uk/</a>	Yes – now defunct		
64	Tales of a Bad Feminist	<a href="http://talesofabadfeminist.blogspot.com/">http://talesofabadfeminist.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
65	The Tempest in the Teacup	<a href="http://tempest-in-the-teacup.blogspot.com/">http://tempest-in-the-teacup.blogspot.com/</a>	Unknown – now defunct		
66	Too Much To Say For Myself	<a href="http://toomuchtosayformyself.com/">http://toomuchtosayformyself.com/</a>	No		
67	Trafford Rape Crisis Blog	<a href="http://traffordrapecrisis.blogspot.com/">http://traffordrapecrisis.blogspot.com/</a>	Unknown		
68	UK Feminista	<a href="http://ukfeminista.org.uk/">http://ukfeminista.org.uk/</a>	Yes – blog removed	No	
69	Uplift Magazine	<a href="http://www.upliftmagazine.com/uplift/">http://www.upliftmagazine.com/uplift/</a>	Yes	No	No
70	Vagina Dentata	<a href="http://www.vaginadentatablog.net/">http://www.vaginadentatablog.net/</a>	No		
71	Vicky Simister's Blog	<a href="http://vickysimister.org/">http://vickysimister.org/</a>	No		
72	We Mixed Our Drinks	<a href="http://ontoberlin.blogspot.com/">http://ontoberlin.blogspot.com/</a>	No		
73	Well I'll Go to the Foot of My Stairs	<a href="http://witchywoo.wordpress.com/">http://witchywoo.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
74	We Won't Submit – For Lesbians	<a href="http://wewillnot.wordpress.com/">http://wewillnot.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
75	Women on the Edge of Time	<a href="http://edgeoftime.wordpress.com/">http://edgeoftime.wordpress.com/</a>	No		
76	Women, Fire and Dangerous Things	<a href="http://womenfiredangerousthings.blogspot.com/">http://womenfiredangerousthings.blogspot.com/</a>	No – but talks of collaboration		
77	Womensgrid	<a href="http://womensgrid.freecharity.org.uk/">http://womensgrid.freecharity.org.uk/</a>	Yes		
78	Women's Resource Centre	<a href="http://womensresourcecentre.blogspot.com/">http://womensresourcecentre.blogspot.com/</a>	Yes		

	Blog				
79	Women's Views on News	<a href="http://www.womensviewsonnews.org/wvon/">http://www.womensviewsonnews.org/wvon/</a>	Yes		
80	XXray specs – Because you're worth it	<a href="http://xxrayspecs.wordpress.com/">http://xxrayspecs.wordpress.com/</a>	Unknown		
81	You Call Yourself the Moral Majority	<a href="http://www.isthispostmodernity.blogspot.com/">http://www.isthispostmodernity.blogspot.com/</a>	Unknown – Private blog – members only.		
82	101 Wankers	<a href="http://www.101wankers.com/">http://www.101wankers.com/</a>	No		



### **Appendix 3 - Participant recruitment e-mail (Study 3)**

#### **Young Women**

Rebecca Wray is doing a PhD in psychology who is conducting research into young women's experiences of being a woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. If you're female, 18-30, and a UK citizen then please consider taking part in my study.

I am interested in recruiting groups of about 6-8 women to take part in an audio recorded group discussion on the topics of women and feminism. It is expected group discussions will last approx. 1-2 hours.

If you are interested in taking part and have friends who may be interested as well, please feel free to show them this e-mail. For more information please contact **Rebecca Wray (by e-mail: [r.j.wray@leedsmet](mailto:r.j.wray@leedsmet), or by phone: 07733143390)**.

In appreciation of your time, if you are a Leeds Met. Psychology student you will receive **1 participation pool point for every 15 minutes** you participate in this study, as well as being **entered into a prize draw for £50-worth of Amazon vouchers**. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

## Appendix 4 – Participant recruitment poster

Poster designed by Kevin Hiley.



# Are you a... 21<sup>st</sup> Century Girl?

## *Call for volunteers*

**Are you an 18-30 year old woman?**

**My name is Rebecca Wray and I'm a PhD student at Leeds Metropolitan University and I am writing to invite you to take part in my study about your experiences of being a young woman in 21st century Britain.**

**I am looking for groups of female friends to take part in a group discussion. If you are interested in taking part and have friends who may be interested as well, please feel free to tell them about this study.**

**If you want to take part, you will be involved in an audio recorded group discussion lasting 1-2 hours on the topics of women and feminism.**

**In order to participate you must fit the following criteria:-**

- You self-define as a woman.**
- You're at least 18, but no older than 30.**
- You are a UK citizen.**

**Recruitment End date: 4th August 2014.**

**All participants will be entered into a prize draw for a £50 Amazon voucher.**

**Leeds Metropolitan University students will be eligible to receive 4 to 8 participation pool points.**

**This study has been approved by Leeds Metropolitan University's Psychology Group Ethics Sub-Committee.**

**For more information please contact Rebecca Wray**  
By e-mail: [r.j.wray@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.wray@leedsmet.ac.uk)  
By phone: 07733143390

## **Appendix 5 – Participant information sheet (Study 3)**

### **Participant Information Sheet**

You have been invited to take part in this study. Before you decide whether to agree to participate in my study, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. If anything is not clear to you or you would like more information please feel free to ask me using the contact details at the end of this sheet.

#### **What is this study for and what is it about?**

This study is part of my psychology doctoral research at Leeds Metropolitan University. I am based in the School of Social, Psychological & Communication Sciences and my Director of Studies is Dr Katy Day. I want to find out about young women's experiences of being a woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. I am also interested in how young women feel about feminism and whether they can relate to it or not.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No, taking part is entirely voluntary. If you do not want to take part, you do not have to give a reason and no pressure will be put upon you to try and change your mind. If you agree to take part you will be provided with an informed consent form to sign. The consent form is required as part of Leeds Metropolitan University's research ethics process for all research projects and is to show you have voluntarily agreed to take part in my study. The consent form will not be used to identify you in the findings and will be stored separately from all other project information.

#### **Who can take part in this study?**

I am interested in listening to the experiences of women who are aged 18-30 years and are citizens of the United Kingdom. I am also interested in the way women in friendship groups discuss topics such as women and feminism. Because of this I am interested in recruiting friendship groups of about 6-8 women per discussion.

#### **What will participation involve?**

Taking part simply involves a group discussion between you and a small group of friends (about 6-8 people in a group) on the topics of women and feminism. You will not need to do any preparation on the topic beforehand.

#### **How will this group discussion work?**

The discussion will be loosely guided by a short set of questions. My role will be to moderate the discussions to help develop a friendly and supportive atmosphere. There are no right or wrong answers here. What I am interested in are your thoughts, opinions and experiences.

#### **How long will this group discussion last?**

This will vary from group to group depending on how interested you are in the topic but it is expected group discussions will usually last from around 1 hour to 2 hours in length.

#### **Where will this group discussion take place?**

Locations will vary depending on the group. I can run a group discussion in a location based at Leeds Metropolitan University, in participant's homes or in another location which may be more convenient and preferable to you and your friends.

**What if there is a question I don't feel comfortable discussing in front of my friends?**

You will be under no obligation to answer any question or discuss any topic or issue you do not feel comfortable talking about. It is hoped that by discussing topics as part of a friendship group this will create a safe and friendly atmosphere where participants can openly express their views but you will be under no obligation to do so. If you wish I can show you a copy of the question schedule before you decide whether to take part or not.

**Will anyone find out what I've said?**

I'll be audio recording the group discussions but only I will know the identity of those who took part in the study. The only people who will have access to the data are myself and my Director of Studies Dr Katy Day. In all write-ups of the study's findings (including my thesis, findings summary, publications and conference papers) I will do whatever is possible to ensure you cannot be identified. In my write-ups I will include examples of what is said in the form of quotes (snippets of dialogue) but no real names will be attached to these or used anywhere else. False names will be used in the group discussion transcript as well as in all write-ups of the study. In addition to this, any other identifying features (e.g. names of workplaces and educational institutions; names of partners, family, friends and work colleagues; names relating to hobbies, pastimes, student societies, and religious membership such as churches/mosques/synagogues) will also be changed and altered to protect your identity.

All participants' data will be treated confidentially and will not be used for any other purpose than what is stated here in this information sheet (e.g. findings summary; PhD thesis; conference papers; and publications such as journal articles and academic books). All data will be held in a locked filing cabinet in a secure location in Leeds Metropolitan University and on an encrypted university USB device. All data will also be confidentially destroyed six months after completion of the study.

As these are group discussions, there is a risk to confidentiality as whatever you say in the discussion will be shared with the rest of the group. All those taking part in this study are encouraged to keep confidential everything heard during the group discussion. However, I cannot fully guarantee that no one will disclose anything they have heard during the group discussion.

**What are the benefits to taking part in this study?**

While there are no direct benefits in taking part in this study, your contribution is important and by taking part you may gain the satisfaction of having taken part in a research study and helping make a contribution to knowledge on the subject of women and feminism.

By taking part you will have the opportunity of being entered into a prize draw for £50-worth of Amazon vouchers as a show of my appreciation of you taking the time to take part in my study. The prize draw will be held after all the group discussions have been completed, which is expected to be August or September 2014.

If you are interested in the outcome of this study, I can send you a copy of a summary of the study's findings once the project is complete. It is expected this project will be completed around September 2015.

If you wish to be entered into the prize draw and/or receive a summary then please provide your e-mail address to the researcher before the group discussion takes place. Your e-mail address will not be used to identify you in the study and will be stored separately from all other project information.

### **What if I change my mind later on?**

It is entirely up to you whether you participate. However, you are still free to stop at any time if you later change your mind and are under no obligation to complete the group discussion. If you do choose to stop taking part during the group discussion you will not be asked any questions as to why you have chosen to stop, nor will you be pressured to stay and continue with the discussion.

You are also free to withdraw your data from the study if you change your mind for up to 2 weeks after the group discussion took place. To withdraw your data, you can contact me by using my contact details below and by quoting the false name you were provided with before the group discussion took place. All your dialogue will then be cut from the group discussion transcript. However, in some cases it may be difficult to distinguish between speakers in a group discussion such as when two or more people speak at the same time.

If you choose to withdraw from the study you will not lose any participation pool points earned (if you're a psychology student), nor your entitlement to be entered into the prize draw. You will still be able to receive a summary of the study's findings if you requested a copy of this.

### **Are there any risks involved in this study?**

There are no anticipated disadvantages or risks to taking part in this study. It is not expected that you will experience any discomfort or distress while taking part in this study.

However, if taking part in this study has caused you any distress you may find it useful to seek support from either Get Connected (Tel: 0808 808 4994; website: <http://www.getconnected.org.uk/>) or The Samaritans (Tel: 08457 90 90 90; e-mail: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org); website: <http://www.samaritans.org/>).

If you're a student from Leeds Metropolitan University, you may find it helpful to seek support from Leeds Metropolitan University's Counselling Service (e-mail: [studentwellbeing@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:studentwellbeing@leedsmet.ac.uk); website: <https://www.leedsmet.ac.uk/studenthub/student-wellbeing-centre.htm>).

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been peer-reviewed by Leeds Metropolitan University's Psychology Group Ethics Sub-Committee.

### **How do I volunteer?**

Think about the information on this sheet, and ask me if you are unsure about anything. If you and your friends would like to take part in this study, then please contact me: **Rebecca Wray**, by phone on **07733143390**, or by email: [r.j.wray@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.wray@leedsmet.ac.uk).

### **What if I have any further questions?**

If you have any questions/concerns, during or after the investigation you may contact my Director of Studies Dr Katy Day (Tel: 0113 81 23284; e-mail: [k.day@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:k.day@leedsmet.ac.uk)). If you wish to contact someone who is independent of this study then you may contact Dr Gavin Sullivan (Tel: 0113 81 23280; e-mail: [g.sullivan@leedsmet.ac.uk](mailto:g.sullivan@leedsmet.ac.uk)).

**Thank you for considering taking part in this project and taking the time to read this information sheet.**

## **Appendix 6 – Informed consent form for participants (Study 3)**

### **Informed Consent Form**

*Please initial the boxes next to each sentence and then, if you are happy to proceed, sign below.*

1. The researcher has given me my own copy of the information sheet, which I have read and understood. ☐
2. The researcher has given me the opportunity to ask questions about the project. ☐
3. I agree to take part in this research. I understand that taking part will involve participating in audio recorded conversations as part of a group discussion. ☐
4. I understand that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that I am free to withdraw myself and/or my data at any time from now until 2 weeks after the group discussion takes place, without giving any reason and without detriment to myself. ☐
5. I give my consent to be audio-taped during the focus group discussion. I agree to the use of direct quotations providing that any quotations are anonymised by the use of a false name and any other identifying details are altered or removed. ☐
6. I understand that my words may be quoted in a doctoral thesis, publications, conference papers and other research outputs but my real name will not be used. ☐
7. I understand that the interview materials will be securely stored by the School of Social, Psychological & Communication Studies at Leeds Metropolitan University and will be confidentially destroyed 6 months after completion of the study. ☐

#### **Data Protection Act 1998**

8. I understand that the information that I provide during my participation in this study will be stored on computer and that any files containing information about me will be made anonymous. ☐  
I agree to Leeds Metropolitan University recording and processing this information about my experiences and that this information may be used for publication in a doctoral thesis, journal articles and conference papers. I understand that information will be used only for this purpose and my consent is conditional upon the University complying with its duties and obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998.

**Participant Name BLOCK LETTERS:** .....

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** .....

**Researcher**

I, the researcher, confirm that I have discussed with the participant the contents of the information sheet.

**Signed:** .....

**Date:** .....

## **Appendix 7 – Discussion schedule (Study 3)**

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **1. Introductions**

- *Participant introductions.*
- *Prompt for: Name, age, where people live, occupation (e.g. employment, student, stay-at-home parent).*
- Could you tell me a little about how you all know each other? Where did you meet?
- To recap this is a group discussion about young women's experiences of being a woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. Could you say a little about what drew your interest in this study?

#### **2. Unpacking being a woman**

- What does being a woman mean to you?
- Can you tell me about your experiences of being a woman?
- Do you think the experience of being a woman was different for our mums?
- Do you feel the experience of being a woman will be different or the same for our daughters or our friend's daughters?
- Are there any particular issues which concern you?

#### **3. Exploring expectations from society**

- Thinking back to our earlier discussion about what it means to be a woman. Could you describe the 'typical woman'?
- What are society's expectations on how to be a woman?  
*Prompt for: health, appearance, body size, attractiveness/sexiness, relationships, family, and careers.*
- Is there anything influencing these expectations?  
*Prompt for: parents, friends, school, religion, and media.*
- How do you feel about these expectations?

#### **4. Exploring life goals**

- What are your dreams and plans for the future?  
*Prompt for: marriage, children, careers, hobbies.*
- Are these goals something all young women want in life?



- Do you think it is easy for young women to achieve any of these goals? Why?
- Are there any difficulties in reaching these goals?

#### 5. Unpacking feminism

- I'd like to now move on a bit and discuss your general thoughts on feminism.
- When you hear the word feminism, what do you think?  
*Prompt for: awareness of feminism today, feminist history & feminist causes.*
- Would you label yourself a feminist? Why/why not?
- Thinking back to our earlier discussion about issues that concern you such as *[list examples discussed]*, do you feel that feminism touches on any of these?

#### 6. Exploring media text study

- Before we approach the end of this group discussion I'd like to discuss with you your thoughts on an earlier study I did for this project. My previous study was an examination of women's magazines aimed at women in their twenties and thirties. I also examined internet blogs written by feminists.
- Do you read any magazines?  
*Prompt for: specific titles, how often they're read.*
- What are your thoughts on these? What is appealing about them?
- Do you read any internet blogs?  
*Prompt for: specific titles, how often they're read.*
- What are your thoughts on these? What is appealing about them?
- If you don't read any magazines or any blogs, why not?

#### 7. Conclusion

- To summarise ..... *[list key points from group discussion]*.
- Is this an adequate summary?
- Of all the points discussed, which one is most important to you?
- Have we missed anything?
- Are you happy that we've covered everything you wanted to say?
- Is there anything else you would like to raise or mention?

### **General Prompts**

- *Could you explain further....?*
- *Do you mean.....?*
- *What else.....?*
- *Is there anything else.....?*
- *Could you give me an example of what you mean....?*
- *Can you tell us more about that.....?*
- *What makes you say that....?*
- *Do you recognise.....?*
- *Is this familiar.....?*
- *Does anyone see it differently.....?*
- *What do other people think about.....?*
- *Do others agree with.....?*
- *Are there any other points of view on this.....?*

### **Appendix 8 – Tables relating to Study 3**

*Table 7: Table showing information relating to each mini focus group.*

Group No.	Date of Discussion	No. of participants	Length of Discussion
FG1	8 <sup>th</sup> May 2014	5	2:16:53
FG2	23 <sup>rd</sup> May 2014	4	3:12:42
FG3	2 <sup>nd</sup> June 2014	3	2:35:43
FG4	15 <sup>th</sup> June 2014	5	5:14:36
FG5	26 <sup>th</sup> July 2014	3	2:40:30
FG6	13 <sup>th</sup> August 2014	4	3:42:22
FG7	9 <sup>th</sup> September 2014	4	2:20:47

*Table 8: Table showing demographic details relating to participants in Study 3 (participants names shown are all randomly selected pseudonyms).*

<b>Gro up No.</b>	<b>Location of FG</b>	<b>Pseudon ym</b>	<b>Ag e</b>	<b>From?</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Miscellane ous details</b>	<b>Label self as femini st?</b>
FG1	Leeds	Fay	18	Castleford	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate /part-time bar worker		No
FG1	Leeds	Isabella	19	Wakefield	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate		No
FG1	Leeds	Anna	19	Watford	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate /part-time lingerie store worker	Went to an all-girl school.	No
FG1	Leeds	Zoe	19	Nottingha m	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate		No
FG1	Leeds	Catherin e	18	Leeds	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate		No
FG2	Leeds	Clara	19	Greater Manchest er area? Works in Manchest er and mentions being from a small town.	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Psychology undergraduate /part-time job		No
FG2	Leeds	Nika	23	Leeds	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate	Mother of one (6 years old).	No
FG2	Leeds	Sophie	19	Bournem outh	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate		No
FG2	Leeds	Mel	18	Ossett	1 <sup>st</sup> year Psychology undergraduate /part-time bar worker		No
FG3	Leeds	Rose	19	London	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Psychology undergraduate		Unclea r. Never says yes or no.
FG3	Leeds	Helen	22	Midlands	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Mental Health Nursing undergraduate	Brought up by grandparen	Yes. Old- school,

						ts.	but not current wave.
FG3	Leeds	Penny	20	Unknown.	2 <sup>nd</sup> year Spanish and Tourism Management undergraduate		Yes. Reads a feminist webzine and talks about feminist issues.
FG4	Leeds	Sandra	29	Leeds	PhD Psychology student/Lecturer	Identifies as gender-queer.	Yes.
FG4	Leeds	Alex	27	Luton	Health care assistant. Starting nursing training. Background in bio research		Yes
FG4	Leeds	Eva	29	Brighton	Runs a management consultancy company/guitarist and bassist in two punk bands	Openly bi. Spent most of teen years homeless.	Yes.
FG4	Leeds	Ingrid	30	Leeds	Primary school teacher		Unknown. (Left focus group early).
FG4	Leeds	Tegan	29	Elsmere Port	Document production for a law firm		Yes but has own concept of what feminism is.
FG5	Bolton	Tara	30	Penistone	Stay-at-home mum	Mother of two (3 and 5 years old). Mormon.	"I dunno". Says it depends on what feminists do, as not going to

							agree with all of them.
FG5	Bolton	Alice	27	Bolton	PhD Literature student	Mormon.	Yes.
FG5	Bolton	Julia	30	Lancaster	Pharmacist	Mother of three (2, 5 and 7 years old). Mormon.	Doesn't think she would as she sees gender equality as automatic these days in this country.
FG6	Huddersfield	Holly	26	Huddersfield	Nanny		No.
FG6	Huddersfield	Claudia	23	Huddersfield	Full-time nurse/part-time student		"It depends who I'm with".
FG6	Huddersfield	Tia	29	Huddersfield	Care worker and volunteers for the police		Yes and no.
FG6	Huddersfield	Sadia	20	Huddersfield	Nursing undergraduate		Yes and no. For equality but not an extremist.
FG7	Leeds	Gwen	26	Rotherham	PhD Psychology student		Yes.
FG7	Leeds	Nina	28	Lake District	Unemployed		Yes.
FG7	Leeds	Ashley	23	Rotherham	PGCE student		Doesn't feel able to, as she's not been actively engaged with it.
FG7	Leeds	Jo	22	Nottingham	PGCE student		Doesn't know. Says

							she has feminis t views but hasn't engage d with it.
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

## **Appendix 9 – Transcription conventions**

[u]	Unknown speaker
[mu]	Multiple unknown speakers
[ind]	Indistinct speech
[Laughs]	Participant's speech broken by them laughing
[Laughing]	Participant is laughing while trying to speak
/	Speech cut off by another speaker
//	Overlapping speech
..	Less than one second pause
...	Extended pause
All capital Letters	Speech emphasised by speaker
-00:28:45	Time marker



**Appendix 10 – Focus Group 1**  
**transcript sample**

**FG1 – 08.05.14.**

INTERVIEWER

Group Number FG1. The Date is Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> May. Let's get started...so...shall we start by...going round the room..and you just tell me a little bit about yourself...uh...who wants to start?

Catherine  
I'll start.

INTERVIEWER

Yeah.

Catherine  
[Coughs] Um...my name is Catherine...I'm 18...um...I live in Leeds..and this is my first year of studying psychology...I'm done.

[u Laugh].

Zoe  
Hm I'm Zoe...I'm 19...I'm from Nottingham...and I'm in my first year of psychology.

Anna  
I'm Anna..I'm 19...I'm from Watford, and a first year psychology student.

Isabella  
I'm Isabella..I'm 19..from Wakefield and...I'm a first year psychology student as well.

Fay  
I'm Fay..I'm 18..I live in Castleford and it's my first year studying psychology.

INTERVIEWER

OK..that's great...uh so..ah do you all know each other then..or..you got these pockets?/

Fay

/We..we know each other from college/.

INTERVIEWER

/Ah right.

Isabella

Yeah and then..me and Anna worked together on..an assignment/.

INTERVIEWER

/Ah OK.

Catherine

Me and Zoe know each other cos..we were in erm seminars together.

INTERVIEWER

Ah right....so you....so some of you know each other and...you've got these little pockets..OK...uh...OK..so to reca...to recap this is a group discussion about young women's experiences of being a woman..in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. So could you say a little about..a bit about what drew you to this study..what made you interested in taking part?

Anna

I went to an all girls' school...so// I've...been around...girls...for like most of my life..like JUST girls..so I thought it'd be quite interesting to discuss that...because..obviously it'd be different to someone who's...gone to a mixed school...//so...yeah...so that's why I've come.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Catherine

Thought it'd be nice taking part in a study that's just girls.

INTERVIEWER

Yeah.

Catherine

[Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

Why's that?

Catherine

Erm...I don't know..I just think it makes me like a little...bit less nervous//...when it's just girls.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

So does it make you more..nervous if there are guys in the room?

Catherine

It's just a bit more awkward I think [laughing] you don't have as much to talk about/.

INTERVIEWER

/Ah right...is there a reason for that...does anyone think?

Anna

I think discussing something like this with boys would...be quite different...//because some of them have quite strong opinions...on women and feminism and everything.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

What kind..of.. opinions?

Anna

Some...chauvinist...so they'd be/.

[mu /laugh/].

INTERVIEWER

/Really...so you get some..some chauvinist guys?/

[u //Laugh].

Fay

/A lot..a lot of my friends are quite sexist..like women belong in the kitchen.

INTERVIEWER

Really?/

Fay

/That sort of VIEW! [laughs].

[mu Laughs].

Anna

Yeah the boys' school was like the opposite of mine's..a lot like that..made a lot of kitchen jokes...all the time...so.

INTERVIEWER

So you feel like you couldn't talk about these kinds of things in front of boys cos they..or men..rather cos they'd just...j..make..make jokes?

Isabella

//They just wouldn't take it seriously//.

Fay

//They wouldn't//.

[mu Laugh].

Fay

/They definitely wouldn't take the conversation topic seriously/.

Isabella

/No/.

Anna

/It would anger me...//if they started to say something...I'd be like NO...just...cos they think they're always right...//so.

[u //Laugh].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[mu Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

So there's a lot of quite sexist...thing..er...things going on with the boys then...are there any that's not sexist or...//supportive?

Anna

//Some of them...hmmm...but it just..depends on...the topic of conversation/.

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah.

Anna

And I think some do it just...for the fun of it...not cos they actually mean it/.

INTERVIEWER

/Ah..just..making jokes and stuff to...go?/

Anna

/Go along with their mates/.

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah/.

Fay

/I think a lot of them that are sexist are probably from their parents//...like from their dads...//their grandparents...it'll've been from them though they got it from.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

Yeah...so you think it's all passed down then?/

Fay

Yeah...I do.

INTERVIEWER

Does anyone else think that?

[mu Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

Parents...family...or just going along with friends?

Anna

A bit of both.

[mu Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

Yeah...OK..so..so they talk about...so when..it..feminism comes up for instance..you think you'd get quite a negative reaction then from men?

Catherine  
From some men yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah...OK well..shall we move  
on...so what does being a woman  
mean to you?

Catherine  
It's good [laughs].

[mu //Laugh].

[u //It's good!].

INTERVIEWER  
Why's it good?

Catherine  
Umm..I don't know..I just...probably  
think we're the  
better..species...//umm...I don't know  
I just think like...tha...I don't know..I  
just don't think I'd like to be a boy  
[laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
No...why's that?

Catherine  
Umm....they're too  
compet...competitive and like  
annoying...so//...it's better being a  
girl..[laughs]/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
/So girls aren't competitive then?

Catherine  
Not really no// I don't think no/.

Zoe  
//Not as much.

INTERVIEWER  
No.

Zoe  
/Well some girls are.

Catherine  
Yeah..//but not as much.

Zoe  
//More the sporty ones/.

Catherine  
/Yeah..I do think boys//...are more.

INTERVIEWER  
//Is it.

INTERVIEWER  
Is...is it competitive just in sporty  
ways or?/

Catherine  
//Just anything...every aspect of  
life//.

Fay  
//No in every way//.

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah/.

Fay  
/Like..if you..if you look  
at...siblings...//you're brother and  
sister...//they'll always try and outdo  
each other...//but it'll be the  
boy..more so.....like with my brother  
when I was at school..cos he's only  
a year..a school year between  
us...whenever I got a good grade  
he'd..try and like..trump it..but I  
wouldn't be bothered...//if I got a

better grade than him...//it was more his side that was about that.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[u Hmm].

Isabella  
I were gonna..yeah gonna say intelligence is like a big part of it as well/.

INTERVIEWER  
/Yeah//.

[mu //Yeah].

Isabella  
They always seem to think they're really really intelligent...//over..over other people.

[mu //Laugh].

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah//...do you find that on the course here..do you find other bo...er men like that?

[mu //Laugh].

Fay  
There's not that many boys on our course is there//..so I think// that..they feel a bit.

Catherine

//No.

Anna  
They usually sit in the corner at the back/.

Fay  
/Yeah/.

Isabella  
/There's some that feel..I think that feel..like they don't have to try//...and they sit at the back and talk really loud..cos we get//..really//..really// irritated.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[u //Annoying].

[u //Laugh].

Fay  
//Irritating yeah.

Fay  
It's those that come in LATE...and go sit at the back..//right at the back co..corner and they never shut up//.

Catherine  
//Yeah [Laughs].

[u //Mmm].

Fay  
Yeah it's really annoying/.

Anna  
/Like in that lecture the other day when she was saying something and they were just laughing...//and when she was talking about bums or something and they're like...//or you know in a..female and they're like..BUMS!...//hmm....total.

Fay  
//Yeah.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah...so what they just don't take  
the class seriously than..you think?/

Anna  
/They probably do outside of lectures  
and stuff...//but I think when they're  
in there they're sort  
of...//yeah...//like..oh..cos psychology  
is seen as like..quite a girly  
subject..and for some people/.

[mu //Hmm. //yeah].

Zoe  
//Showing off and stuff.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
/Especially as there's quite a lot of  
girls on the course//..they'll feel like  
that..the girls are like sort of taking  
the course over//.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Mmm].

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah.

Anna  
So they have to like make  
themselves known...//that they are//  
there.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[mu Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
Do you feel psychology's a girly  
subject?

Fay  
I wouldn't say it's a girly subject I'd  
just say that more girls...tend to lean  
towards it than boys do...//I think  
it's..more of a...female orientated  
subject.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah...so do you all feel...the same  
way about that than that it's...quite  
dominated by women or?/

Catherine  
/Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
So does any?/

Catherine  
/In..in like the workplace I don't think  
it is though like..I think//...like//..like  
most psychologists that's..appear to  
be like men//...or..like any of the  
studies that we've learnt about..it's  
all like men psychologists but..if you  
look at...like our year group  
it's..there's only literally like a  
handful of boys..that's it/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //No].

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

/Hmm....So what do you think's going on there then...if they're all..if all the studies seem to be men and the psychologists in the workplace seems to be men but..the course all seems to be women?

Isabella

I think it might've changed over time/.

[u /Mmm/].

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah/.

Anna

/Yeah studies are quite old...sort of like.

Fay

Well the studies we look at they're obviously not from...our..age group at all...//and I just think it's...changed completely.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that's a good thing?

Fay

Yep..yep.

Catherine

[Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

So everyone thinks it's a good thing?

Catherine

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

Yeah...that it's all shifting..or do you think it should..do you think it's good that it's dominated by women or that..or do you think it would be better if there was...more of a mix...of men and women?

Anna

It's not...completely dominated by women...cos men still are..attracted to the subject...I think it's good that...there are both men and women on the course...it's not just like..we only take women onto it or...won't take men it's...there is a balance..it doesn't need to be perfectly equal...because it's not everyone's taste so...it's like any subject//...so.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Isabella

I think you can definitely see a difference between...when a male psychologist has researched something to when a female psychologist has researched something.

INTERVIEWER

Why's that?

Isabella

I don't know...I think..I think the females are more like towards sort of....like th..the feelings of the...like participants..but male it's sort of more to do with like quant..like..quantitative stuff//...like the numbers//...and things like..I don't know why...but I just sort of can see a difference/.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

/Hmm...do you think it could be like the language..or the writing or something then...as well?

Isabella

I don't...I don't know/.

INTERVIEWER

/Or is it more just what..the topics they study?

Isabella

I think it's probably the way they approach it//...that's different.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u Hmm].

INTERVIEWER

Does anyone else notice that?

Anna

You sometimes struggle..like when you just get the name...to know if it's a male or a female...if it's on something..quite like..a general topic like...//but if it's something to do with like women...I'd expect more women to research...stuff based on women//...then men/.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Fay

/But then there's like married couples...//that do studies together like...I got books at home about...do

you know the book..erm..'Men Are From Mars Women Are From Venus'...//that book...I got a similar book to that by two psychologists//...that are married/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Is it.

INTERVIEWER

/Is it Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers?

Fay

I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

It's a..green book with like a..I think it's got like dolls and b/.

Fay

/No it's not..it's not that one...I think they've done quite a few...//and they've done a book on body language as well//...but I think that..they were..because they're looking at both sides of it...//but they're looking at the similar...sort of aspects...that they're looking from a male and a female point of view...//and I think that it just depends...what that person would rather study...//what interests them...//it just so happens that...men look at something more...women look at something more/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER



//Ah right.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah.....OK..do you think..that's just how it is then..that men are interested in some things than women...and vice versa?

[mu Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

OK...so...is it..is being a women an important part of your identity at all...or does it not matter?/

Zoe

/I don't think it matters.

INTERVIEWER

No.

Zoe

Not something I've ever thought about..but yeah...well...[laughs]//...that's why/.

[mu //Laughs].

Fay

/I think it's just..being a woman comes into image//...//and the way you act...around certain things...like if we weren't....women than we wouldn't...wear make-up and stuff like that...//and I think

that...especially with my friends..the way we looks..quite important...//like we always wear...loads of make-up..//and mascara and stuff...[laughing]..but it sounds really vain but..I think it's the same with quite a lot of girls/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah/.

Isabella

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[mu Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah...do you think a lot of girls are interested in their appearance and...looking...a certain way?/

Fay

/Definitely/.

Isabella

/Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

Does everyone feel the same?

[mu Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

Yeah...OK....so..does anyone else feel that it's an important part of their identity at all in any way..or?

Anna

I don't think it is as much...at the minute because we're still like teenagers...//maybe in..//quite a few

years like when we get to the age where we'll want to..maybe settle down and...maybe have a family and stuff then it'll be more...part of our identity because obviously...if you want to have kids and stuff...being a woman...like..obviously...it's quite..mothers have more of an important role I think//...with a child...because obviously we're the ones that carry the child for nine months and then..nurture them for the first few months and everything...//so I think then it'll become more...part of my identity rather than now...//because now I'm still..just a teenager//...so.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
So...does everyone else feel that way..that it's about an age thing so maybe it d..doesn't mean as much when you're younger but maybe when you're older?

Catherine  
Yeah I..I think it probably just more..gets more..important to you like..when you're older...I think now

you're just...sort of like...enjoying yourself and not really thinking about...really that bothered about who you are as such...//it's more important that..when you get older.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah...so being who are isn't as important when you're younger?

[u Hmm].

[mu Yeah/].

Anna  
/Because you're still trying to work out who you actually are...//become grown up so obviously...like coming to uni..might change because I..I know a lot of my friends are a lot different...to how they were at home..so obviously their parents are strict and...they've had a bit of freedom..so I think you're constantly changing...//that you don't know who you actually are...j//...yeah/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//At this point?

INTERVIEWER  
/Yeah...and gender doesn't come up..into the iden..you know who you know trying to find who you are..that's not an important factor is that....it's...what are the important factors when you're trying to find who you are...do you think?

Isabella

I think a big part of it is what you want to do with your life...//mostly...I think worst feelings not knowing what to do...[laughing]// with your life.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

Yeah.

Isabella

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER – 12:45

Did you feel there's a lot of pressure there then trying to figure out what you want to do with your life?

Isabella

Yeah...I always felt really worried about cos I never really knew what I wanted to do..I still sorta don't really know what I exactly what I want to do now...but I feel really under pressure to...like I..I don't want to end up like with...no job and [laughs].

INTERVIEWER

Yeah.

Isabella

Yeah/.

Fay

/Teachers at A-Level put a lot of pressure on you to figure out what you want to do/.

Isabella

/Yeah definitely/.

INTERVIEWER

/Hmm/.

Anna

//You have to decide so quickly//.

Fay

//I definitely felt that at our college//.

Isabella

Hmm.

Catherine

Yeah.

Anna

It's sorta like...you need to fill this..like fill in UCAS and pick these courses and do all this...just decide what you want to do with the rest of your life...whilst also thinking...I've got all these exams coming up//...there's too much pressure on you like..at that age//...and..cos you have to decide certain things at GCSE as well..and at my school...if you wanted to do certain subjects in sixth-form...you had to do..certain subjects at GCSE...//cos you couldn't do...um...like if you wanted to do art at A-Level you had to do it at GCSE obviously and everything...but if you wanted to do a humanity at A-Level...you couldn't do...two art subjects...//at GCSE..like...out of your choices...so I think when you're 16..and you're..well before 16..it's like when you're 14..you're having to make a choice...what you want to do...when you're 18...I think it's quite a big..cos it all..leads onto each other...and it's a big choice...cos obviously you don't really understand...//what you want..you don't really know what it's going to be like when you get to it.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Zoe  
We didn't have that//...we did  
whatever we wanted at GCSE and it  
didn't matter...//you didn't have to do  
it at A-Level.

Anna  
//Did.

Fay  
//I didn't..I had it at my high  
school...like I don't think it was  
as...much as yours...but if we  
wanted to do...art..at our  
college...I'm pretty sure we had to do  
art at// GCSE/.

Isabella  
/Yeah/.

Fay  
/I think it just depended on what  
college you went to..and what their  
requirements were...//cos it's  
different for unis as well.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Yeah//].

[u //Hmm//].

INTERVIEWER  
It..varies with schools...mine  
was...//quite strict like that..again  
you..you could only have them in  
columns..and it was..you could only  
have one...from each column...//and  
y..you know if you want..you couldn't  
do both geography and history for  
instance/.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

Fay  
Yeah, that's what mine was like.

Zoe  
Could you not!?

INTERVIEWER  
Nah.

Zoe  
I did geography and history..we just  
got to pick//..we could do anything

Fay  
//Oh we couldn't..we couldn't do that  
either...but that depended on what  
erm...group we were in...so like the  
higher groups had a different set of  
columns...to the lower groups/.

Isabella  
/Yeah/.

INTERVIEWER  
/Yeah/.

Isabella  
/If we got better grades we had to  
choose more A-Levels...//with the

grades I got I had to have four..I didn't want four..I wanted three but I had to do four//...I didn't want to/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
//I had to do four as well.

Anna  
//I had to..I did four for my first year...//as well then I could drop to//..three/.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

Zoe  
//Yeah.

Fay  
/Yeah we could do that at..ours...but because of the grades we got at GCSE..we..we weren't allowed to pick three because they thought we could do...//four/.

Isabella  
Yeah//.

Isabella  
/There wasn't four that I wanted to do though...there was three but I..just picked an extra one and I ended up failing it because I never wanted to do it.

Anna  
I don't think that's very fair.

Isabella  
It's not is it..I said I don't want to do it and they said well you got to.

Anna

It's added pressure on you// though...//because obviously A-Levels are a lot of work...//and if it's a thing that you don't want to do like I did chemistry//...and I wish I hadn't/.

[u //Mmm].

Isabella  
//It is.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

Fay  
/I did chemistry/.

Isabella  
/I know..that's what..that's what I had to choose and I failed it/.

[u /Laughs].

Isabella  
Worst decision I ever made/.

Anna  
/As soon as it got to like results day I was like I'm dropping chemistry that's it..gone/.

Fay  
/Yeah that's what I did/.

Anna  
/Cos if I..hadn't..done chemistry then I would have focused more..on my other subjects...and then I might have got better grades/.

Isabella  
/I know.

[u Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

So you feel it's  
very...like..constraining then...//with  
what they let you do?

Isabella  
//Yeah.

[mu //Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that affects your future  
then..do you think..in a way?

Fay

Definitely..because...the..the fact  
that I had to do four...the fact that I  
did chemistry...impacted on my  
grades at the end of...is it year  
13...//year 13...so when I applied to  
Leeds University...I didn't get in  
because of my predicted  
grade...//that I got in here...so I think  
if I had gone to Leeds uni it  
could've...like my future could be  
different to what it is now that I'm at  
Leeds Met...//so that definitely  
impacted on mine.

Isabella  
//Mm Mm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Anna

I wanted to go to  
Cardiff..originally...and then  
Nottingham Trent was my back-  
up...//but then cos....I'd done...quite  
badly in my first year and that  
impacted on my second year...that  
meant I went through clearing...so  
then I've come here...and I'm a lot  
further away from home...and then..a

couple of my grades suffered in the  
first semester cos obviously...I was  
too far away from home so I was  
home sick and I...//think...if I'd  
done...hadn't had as much pressure  
at school...then I'd a done  
better..and then I'd've been  
happier...a..at the start//...of coming  
to university...now I'm fine...//but just  
like..there's too much pressure and  
then when you get here as well it's  
all...pushed onto you like we got all  
this work/.

[u //Urgh].

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
/Yeah.

Isabella  
I had to apply through clearing too  
cos my college grades were terrible  
[laughs]//...well [Laughs] terrible for  
what I was used to//...I were  
really..really good all the way  
through high school and were like  
when it got to college it just sort of  
went/.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
/I think that were the same for a lot  
of people.

Isabella  
Yeah/.

Zoe  
/It just dropped/.

Fay  
/That people didn't expect how difficult A-Levels were going to be//...//because at GCSE I think ever..a lot of people can say that..they didn't have to revise and then ended up with really good grades...//and then as soon as you got to A-Level..it was just like..if you don't revise you're gonna fail that.

Isabella  
/No.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[mu Yeah].

Anna  
But even if you do revise like....the exam boards on the mark schemes and stuff...on mine if you didn't have a specific word/.

Fay  
/Yeah that's//.

Catherine  
//Yeah//.

[u //Yeah//].

Fay

/That's why I kept failing our biology mocks...[laughing] cos I didn't put specific words down/.

Anna  
/Were you with like WJEC?

Fay  
Erm...that was we were with/.

Isabella  
/AQA/.

Fay  
/Yeah AQA//.

Zoe  
//AQA//.

Catherine  
We were all AQA.

Isabella  
I remember on one of the mark schemes...I got my..marks back fo..from the mock exam...and I think I'd writ..er..like the word harmful...and in the actual mark scheme the word was dangerous...like..it's..more or less the same word but I c'nt have the mark because I'd not writ dangerous I'd writ harmful.

Catherine  
That's...

Zoe  
That's stupid.

Isabella  
Oh Urgh!/  
Anna

/It's more like a memory test.

[u //Yes].

Fay  
//Yes definitely/.

Isabella – 00:18:10  
//Rather than an actual...what you know.

INTERVIEWER  
Do you think that's got any...value or purpose than a memory test..do you think that's an important thing?/

Isabella  
/No/.

Catherine  
/No....everyone's got a different memory like..ya know...//loads of different people could remember better..but then but if you were to give em a piece of work and they had..ya know whatever time to do it then..they might be able to do really really well at it but they just might not have a great memory// that's all/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
/I don't necessarily think grades always reflect your intelligence...//because if you're not good at an exam which is...what the majority of...like the way testing people is these days//then you're not gonna get very far are ya...but there's..some people that are really good at...things outside an exam...//but...just cos you're not good at an exam don't mean that you're not intelligent.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
What do you all think of this current push the government's got then where they...cos they're dropping a lot of coursework now at A-Level and GCSE focusing more on exams..do you think that's?/

Zoe  
/I'd prefer that..cos I'm terrible at coursework...//but I'm alright at exams...dunno why...I can't work in a long period of time..I'd be stressed// in order to do work.

INTERVIEWER  
//Ah.

Catherine  
[/Laughs].

Catherine  
I don't really think it's fair..because like..some people...li..like you said like they do better..rather than in just exams...//and coursework might be their chance to sorta show that..they are intelligent and get a good grade...//where all..everybody's been shoved into exams now..I don't think it's really..a fair way to test everybody's intelligence/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
/No/.



Isabella  
/I think it's gonna stress a lot of people out more// than...it's beneficial to if that makes sense..like I think a little bit of pressure's good/..//but if you really really hate exams then..you're gonna be stuffed really aren't ya...you're gonna be like...I know I don't particularly like exams//...//so.

Catherine  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//No.

Catherine  
//No.

Anna  
The thing is if they change like mark things and stuff it wouldn't be as bad//...but if it's going to be as strict as it is now...//then it's not fair//...because obviously a lot of people will struggle with it..because they don't have a good memory/.

Isabella  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
/I know that my GCSE science teacher was telling me..last time I saw her that...the GCSE mark scheme for science..is..looking at

spelling as well...like if you don't spell a word..correctly...but you've used that word..and you've used it in the right context and you've explained things then you'll lose all marks//..for that question.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Because you couldn't spell it?

Fay  
Yeah..but a lot of..but if you think about the words that are in psychology//...if you can't spell that word within a certain degree/.

[mu //Hmmm].

INTERVIEWER  
/Like phenol..interpretative phenomenological analysis..[laugh]..something like that?

[m Laughs].

Fay  
Yeah!..something like that!

Anna  
With that I'd have no hope.

Isabella  
I didn't know that but I don't think that's right fair//...because if you want to do psychology and not...English language or whatever than they're..two completely different things...//so why people are combining the two then...I've got no idea.

[mu //No].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

So you don't think...knowing how to spell..or write is imp..is that important if//..you get in //certain// subjects/?

Fay

//Well it is.

[mu //It is].

[u //Yeah].

Fay

//It's like the..odd word, like if you spell one word wrong...some words are quite difficult to spell..and you've missed a letter out// or you put the wrong letter.

Isabella

//I don't think you should lose all marks on your question/.

Fay

//Yeah that..that's really unfair because...it's just like going back with if you haven't got a specific word...if you've written it in the right context..and you've got the right answer but you haven't used that word then..then you lose that mark and that's unfair because you..you've actually got the question right.

Isabella

Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

Yeah.

Anna

Obviously it is important...to know how to spell// but sometimes you just get a bit of a blank and you're like//...you don't know what the right letter is..and sometimes you just..mess it up..accidentally and if you skim over it quickly because you've got five minutes left...you're not necessarily gonna notice that you've put the wrong letter or if..or if your writing's a bit bad..and they think you've spelt it wrong...//you're gonna lose marks and that's...not fair.

[u //Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Catherine

Especially in an exam like...you don't..there's no way for you to check up like how to spell it// in...ya know they don't give you a dictionary so you've just gotta guess//...//it's not really fair.

INTERVIEWER

//No.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

[u //Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

OK..so...did you think men and women performed differently in...uh..deal...with that pressure differently do you think..or...the pressure of exams..or?/

Fay

/I..I don't think it goes down to gender...//I think it just goes down to each individual...like..my...Dad's really rubbish at exams..but he's really good at...coursework and like pre..presentations and things like that...but that could be the same for...anybody...it could be my Mum that were like that...it doesn't really matter//..gender wise.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Does everyone feel the same it's down to...being an individual?

[mu Yeah].

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah.

Anna  
Your gender doesn't like necessarily identify...whether you're...capable of exams or not...//it's not...that boys are better or girls are better, it's just//..individual people.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
So girls are..ya know so there no..nothing that girls are better at than boys or vice versa?

Fay  
There will be some things that girls// are better at but that's because they'll've been brought up doing that or...like..they'll be used to doing it more so than boys.

[u //Yeah].

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah.

Isabella  
I think there's some things that like men and women are both..like differently naturally better at like..I think...like overall like you'd...you'd never get...a woman that's like...s..stronger than a man// or like/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Anna  
/Unless she makes herself like that/.

Isabella  
/Yeah...er...th....there's expectations but like..as a like er...a..a widespread sorta thing...//but I don't really think yeah like you say it's more...down to individual...//now.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
OK..so just moving on a bit..can you tell me about your experiences of being a woman?

Fay  
In terms of what?/

INTERVIEWER

/Er...just in terms of life...er growing up maybe..or now..or in..different spheres of life..is it different at home or...uni..work even?

Anna

I found it quite difficult in sixth-form...//because we had...it was just an all girls sixth-form..and then an all boys sixth-form...cos if..something happened...that would spread round the whole school....and then like..there was a lot of..bitchiness// and...the boys can be more bitchy than the girls//...and they spread more rumours than the girls did//..and being in that sort of environment where you're just...surrounded by that all day every day...is quite stressful...and cos obviously like..you hear things like about your friends and you're like "oh my god" and then you go to them and then...it..it's quite difficult...I think...teenagers have a lot of pressure on them and I think...it doesn't help when there are a lot of stereotypes...and there are..stupid jokes like kitchen jokes and stuff...//I think that's...it makes it a lot harder to grow up and be yourself...//cos you're scared of being judged by other people//...because you know people will//...cos people are in groups and then..like one group doesn't like something specific that you do..that whole group will...make a point of that...so.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[mu //Hmm. mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Catherine

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

Hmm..so there's..stereotypes..what kind of stereotypes come up?

Anna

Like..the..bitchy popular girls...well that's what it was like at my school...there was this group of girls that just thought they were...absolutely incredible//...didn't care about anyone else.

[u //Laughs].

Fay

*'Mean Girls'?*

Anna

Yeah..but then there was this sort of...sort of..geeky girls..and then there were sort of like the ones that just sort of...were never there and stuff...so.

Fay

Girls get blonde bimbo a lot...//but no boy get's blonde bimbo [laughing/]...//which is really annoying cos...just cos you're blonde..//doesn't affect your intelligence/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Laughs].

Catherine

//No.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Isabella

//I think sometimes when you're a girl people...erm...think that you're less intelligent..I don't know why...//I think...it's..it's going to sound odd but when you make an effort to sort of...present yourself in a nice way...people get..an image of you that you're not intelligent//..and that all you care about is the way that you look...//so sometimes when you're trying to make an effort with both..sides of it...because like image...comes into a lot of things..today I think...//but then people get...the wrong end of the stick that all you're bothered about is the image and not the actual// sort of intelligence...part of the deal/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

[u /Hmm/].

INTERVIEWER

/So who sees women like that..who sees women as being..like ya know like you said caring about appearance and not being//intelligent?

Isabella

//I think it's both men and women/.

INTERVIEWER

/Hm/.

Catherine

//Other girls are really// like that..if..if another girl..really like tries with her appearance and that..another girl would just be bitchy about it instead of// saying like "oh she looks nice"// they'd be like.."oh..why she put so much make-up on or"..I think g..oth..girls can be really bitchy to other girls as well.

Isabella

//Yeah.

Isabella

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

Yeah//.

Isabella

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

So is this bitchiness thing a problem..then?

Fay

Can be/.

Isabella  
/Yeah/.

Fay  
/It depends what you're like as a person like if someone's been bitchy about you and you're thick skinned then it's not gonna bother you that much//...but it can really upset some people when other people are talking about them//..like I don't personally care if another girl's talking about me they can do what they want it's...//their business//..but..if like a lot of people..like some people I know they'd get really upset about somebody talking about them/.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
/I think at a..yeah I think at a time it used to be really like all girls stick together...but now it's not real..it's not like that that much anymore//...it's..it's [/laughs] a bit like every man for himself/.

INTERVIEWER  
//No?

[mu //Yeah!].

[mu //Laughs].

Fay  
/It is!

Isabella  
Yeah.

[u Hmm].

INTERVIEWER  
So you think there used to be a time when girls all stuck together then..and..//I think?/

[u //Yeah].

Isabella  
/Yeah I think more so a time ago than now//...yeah/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Fay  
/I think when we were younger..especially...like// all our friends...no..no one had a bad word to say about anybody...but then as soon as you get to like high school or college..girls just turn and they're like//..“well I'm better than you..and yo..I don't like you”.

[u //Hmm].

[u //Hmm].

Anna  
What you were saying about..if..another girl..like says something about you...I..I don't mind if another girl says something about me but it's when...there's a group of girls...that all say like..different things...//that's when it affects someone more cos obviously it's...someone else like agreeing with them and it's like..then it becomes more of a problem..then it's harder to deal with than if it's just one//

person//...so I think...that's when  
bitchiness becomes a problem  
because//...it's..then it's not fair.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Mmm].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
So why do you think it  
changes...when you get to high  
school..what happens?/

Fay  
You get more opinionated.

Anna  
And people are social climbers.

INTERVIEWER  
Ah.

Isabella  
Yeah.

Anna  
Like they wanna be the best..at that  
school cos they want that  
reputation...so if they...have to be  
bitchy about another girl...to be  
friend with someone just to make  
sure that they're better than..they'll  
do it//...well that..that's what it was  
like at my school.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Zoe

I didn't find that at all at school...//at  
school all the girls were all like  
friends..and then..I went to quite a  
small school though but then you  
went to college and there were like  
2000 people//...then it was like...“OK  
there's all these different groups of  
girls all competing for different guys”  
and it was just like..uhf/.

INTERVIEWER  
//No.

[u //Laughs].

Fay  
/I think boys can lead // to girls being  
bitchy a lot//...that's definitely like the  
top topic why girls are bitchy//.

Isabella  
//Yeah definitely.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Yeah?

Fay  
Yeah..cos there's this girl code you  
can't go after anyone's ex...but  
if..if...//you...didn't go after anyone's  
ex..then nobody// would have  
anybody..like at all..like everyone  
would be lonely and wouldn't have a  
//boyfriend or anything because girl  
code would apply to everybody.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Zoe  
//Nobody [Laughs//].

[u //Mmm].

Anna

But they're an ex for a reason so..

Fay

/Exactly!/

Anna

/They don't want them anymore...or  
for whatever reason//..so why  
can't..that other person be happy?  
Why can't/?

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Fay

/That...it's just main reason girls are  
bitchy it's boys/.

Isabella

/I think at //this age girls are quite  
possessive/.

Fay

/Boys [ind] girls//.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah?//

Catherine

//Yeah//.

Isabella

//I know even I..I can be sometimes/.

INTERVIEWER

Hmm/.

Catherine

Yeah// [ind].

[mu //Laughs].

Isabella

//I think there are some..[ind]//.

INTERVIEWER

//[ind]..guys?/ - 28:45

Isabella

/Well cos ya..cos you start..you start  
being able to control a lot of your  
own things at this age don't  
you?//...like you start being able to  
make your own decisions so I think a  
little bit of that power it goes to  
people's heads really [laughs] don't//  
it?

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

Yeah?

Isabella

Hmm/.

Catherine

/Specially if yo..I think if you've got a  
boyfriend like you're either..not  
bothered at all..or you're either at the  
other end of the scale where you're  
like..really like/.

Fay

/Psychotic.

Catherine

//Yeah.

[mu //Yeah]. [mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

Whe..what...where having a  
guy..having a guy matters and/?

Catherine



/Well not about so much..having a boyfriend matters but once you've got one you're either..on the scale of..you're completely...not bothered..you're not jealous..you're not anything..or you're at the other end of like..psychotic..there in't an in-between.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm//.

[mu //Hmm//].

Anna  
I can get quite jealous...//of like...cos I..I.d..my boyfriend could be quite flirty...and I can't stand that cos like he'd be quite flirty with like...girls that he says he doesn't like..there's my flatmate..who..he..doesn't like but then when he sees her he's like really flirty and I'm like...doesn't process in my head...//how he can be like that.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

Catherine – 00:29:50  
Put that to a stop [laughs//].

[mu //Laughs].

Anna  
But yeah...think it's quite weird.

Catherine  
Yeah/.

Zoe  
/I think it varies whether you're jealous on the person.

[mu Mmm/].

Zoe

/Like I'm only bothered if it's an ex...if it's not an ex then/.

Isabella  
/I'm not really bothered at all/.

Fay  
/No she's so// laid back it's unreal/.

Isabella  
/No I don't really care! [laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

[u //Oh].

Fay  
Like some girls try to tell their boyfriends not to go out with their friends or go on holiday with their friends cos they won't trust them and that but..but if you don't trust them// don't be with them/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
/I never ever understand it...//if somebody said to me you're not going on holiday with your friends...I'd be like "no see you later then"//...but then again I have been with my boyfriend for like four years...//like a married couple so/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[/mu Laughs/].

Anna

/I'd never say to someone like you're not going on holiday with...your friends or..you're not allowed to talk to that person..you're not allowed to..see them cos I think..that's when it becomes a//..like controlling/.

[u //Laughs].

Isabella  
/It'd really creep me out//...it would//..I'd..I'd ge...I'd get creeped//..I'd want to get as far away from him as possible/.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
Hmm//.

[u /Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
So you don'...so everyone feels...they don't like this controlling aspect that some women...have...this possessiveness?/

Anna  
/I think boys have it/.

Zoe  
/Boys have it..//yeah/.

[u Mmm].

Fay  
/Boys have it a lot more than girls/.

Isabella  
/But they try and make it out as if they don't/.

Fay  
/Yeah/.

Anna  
/I've been told I'm not allowed to talk to a certain boy//...because I got with him...on the night that I actually met my boyfriend and my boyfriend...he didn't know him at the time but I..I saw him..and he saw it happen and then..from then on he's like "no..you're not allowed to talk to him"...but I would never say to him..."you're not allowed to see her cos...you've got with her or you've done this with her"...//and I think...he's more possessive with me..cos I think..girls....are stronger now...like we're more free to do what we want...//so I think boys are a bit sort of..more controlling// because like before women used to quite submissive like "oh...you're perfect// and...I'll..I'll do everything for you and"/.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Catherine  
//Mmm.

[u //Laughs].

Isabella  
/All they wanted to do was get married..//but like right now I sorta think..like their aim in life was like to get married and like start this family..but that's..I don't think..about that at all...//like when people have kids and get married at this age

like//..not..not offensive to anyone  
that has children or anything young  
but like..I..I couldn't/.

Anna  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//No.

[u //Urgh].

Catherine  
/You'd think you'd...I'd...I'd rather be  
doing..sommat else with my  
life//...not like in a nasty way cos// I  
know some people do enjoy like  
having children young and stuff  
but..you think..you can do that when  
you're older/.

[mu //Yeah].

[u //Hmm].

Fay  
//You can be//

Isabella  
//That used to be the ideal of life//.

Fay  
/You can be selfish at this age can't  
ya?/

Isabella – 00:32:05  
/Yeah ya can now/.

Fay  
/Because technically you're still a  
kid.

[u Hmm].

Isabella  
Women didn't used to work did  
they..they used to have go out and

like get married to be able to get  
money and...//things like that but cos  
we can..do it off us own back now  
like//...to me..getting married is not  
the be all and end all.

[mu //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
No.

[mu No].

Anna  
One of my friends has..recently had  
a baby..j..six months now...she's my  
age// but her boyfriend's 27//.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[u //Gasp].

Zoe  
//Oh!...Sorry!

[mu //Laughs].

Anna  
She used to work with him...and then  
like they started to each other..and  
but he's so controlling...it was her  
18<sup>th</sup> birthday party...and..he..wouldn't  
let her talk..to her friends  
about...th...like the girls' holiday they  
went on the year before...like he just  
went mad...and like started kicking  
off...she's not allowed like out the  
house and stuff and..I think that's so  
controlling/.

Isabella  
/You just think what are you  
doing...//WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

[u //Laughs]. – 00:32:55

Anna

She doesn't really know what to do like sh..when we see her she seems like all happy and in love and everything but then...you sorta see behind th...ya know like she's actually really sad/.

Fay

/Cos that's the age difference as well/.

Anna

/Mmm!/.

Catherine

//Why would you.

Isabella

//Why would you stay? Why would ya...//cos she's/.

Catherine

//[ind] she [ind].

Fay

//They've got a kid now/.

Zoe

/Mmm. Yeah.

Fay

That's it..your child would be first priority/.

Anna

/But..it..even before/.

Zoe

//The baby's not going to be happy//.

Isabelle -00:33:30

//...just couldn't...//that's what I think..why..why would you stay with somebody like that?/

INTERVIEWER

/Hmm/.

Anna

/But in his..eyes...like that's...how..he should treat a woman...because that's how he's obviously been brought up and that's...like his generation...cos he's already got like three kids/.

[u /Oh mmm/].

Catherine

/Oh god.

[m Gasps].

Isabelle

That's so weird.

[u Laughs].

Zoe

I couldn't take on someone else's kids/.

Fay

/No way/.

Anna

/I don't know how she has...there's a photo of her...with him and like his kids...she looks like one of his children.

[mu Laughs].

Anna

When I..when I saw it I was like oh my god...like she doesn't look...old enough to be...in that/.

Catherine  
//His girlfriend.

[u //No].

Anna  
Yeah..and they're getting married as well.

Catherine  
Oh god.

Isabella  
I think some women still think that...they've..that they have to be dependent.

[u Hmm/].

INTERVIEWER  
/Yeah/.

[mu /Hmm].

Isabella  
But..I..I think there's still little..little bits about...I don't know whether it's like...I don't..it's gonna sound...like a gen..genetic or like..ya know like a tradition thing//...it depends.

Fay  
//Some women will still think like they did back in like..early 1900s//...//don't they? They'll still have the same view.

[u //Yeah].

Catherine  
//It'll depend on their parents as well...if..if they've got a mum like that who's quite//...submissive and the dad's like..the dominant one or whatever// if they're not equal then probably the girl'll think "Oh I have to be like that"/.

Isabella  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
/Yeah/.

Fay  
/They'll think that's normality/.

Catherine  
/Yeah/.

Anna  
/But the thing is this girl's parents were..really equal....they're both policewomen..but not policewomen but like//...police..policeman and policewoman and like her younger sister's not..like that at all she's not submissive or like...I can/.

[u //Laughs].

Fay  
/Maybe it's just her personality then/.

[mu /Yeah/].

Anna  
/I think it's just..her...and I think she got into it and didn't realise what..he was actually like...but I think boys now..they're not...necessarily as bad as that..some of them can still be...controlling// but.

Isabella  
//Hmm].

Zoe  
My boyfriend couldn't care less about anything...//I could kiss someone else and he wouldn't

care//...he's not// bothered. Apart from when he's drunk and then it's like well...//avoid everyone..but...mm...my experience of jealousy there.

[mu //Laughs].

[uGasp. uLaughs//].

[u //Whoo! Laughs].

Fay  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
I think they still have that possessiveness over women...somewhere in the back of their heads// but I think some of them are better at hiding it than..others//...yeah.

[u Hmm/].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm//.

[u //Hmm].

Isabella  
I don't know..I think..I think....that sort of outlook on it's a bit...like embedded into everyone really but it's...just...I don't know...//I don't know [laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Embedded?

[mu Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
So when you say embedded do...do you mean like it's..engrained in people's...in everyone..that we have to be?

Fay  
Like some people will pay more attention to things..than others will so...those men that still have the belief that..women should be the submissive ones men should be the dominant ones...they'll have taken more notice...when they've...read about it or they've seen it...or they've heard it then others will...//I think it..it..or actually does go down to your personality and what you're like..how you've been brought up...as to whether you believe in those opinions or not.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
So..you're all..how old are you all..are you all 18?

Isabella  
19//.

Anna  
19//.

Zoe  
19//.

INTERVIEWER  
19..19.

Fay  
18//.

Catherine  
I'm 18.

INTERVIEWER  
18 then...OK..cos you were saying..co..you think being this age is too young then to settle down..is that?/

Catherine  
/Yeah//.

Zoe  
//Yeah.

Anna  
Well it depends on..who you are..cos if you// do want a family like if you want a big family...and you wanna start having kids early then...if you're happy and you're in love and you..want to marry that person then that's fine...//but I think if people just..rush into it..then it's...I think you have to be one hundred per cent certain like if there's any doubt then//..they..they shouldn't do it..but...I know I wouldn't want to get married at this age/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[u /No I wouldn't].

Zoe  
/I know a lot of people my age engaged but they're all like Christian [ind//] others...but other reasons to get married/.

[mu //Yeah].

Catherine  
/I think as well like at this age..if I was to turn around and like..[laughs] say to my Mum and Dad oh like "me and my boyfriend are getting married" they'd probably laugh and

be like.."don't be silly"..but like...years and years ago before..like..for example my Nan and Granddad like..my Nana were probably like 17 when she married my Granddad//...and it were like normal if you were to turn around to your friends now and be like "oh I'm engaged to my boyfriend" they'd probably just like laugh at you//...so it's..like less..acceptable now I think/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u Laughs].

Isabella  
/I don't think people have time to get married anymore...//they don...they don't though do they?...like literally people don't have..my Mum never got married...but..I don't think that were really her..I think she wanted to..but that weren't her choice..she got messed about a lot [laughs]//..so...yeah/.

[mu //Laughs].

[mu//Laughs].

Anna  
/My Mum was married and had my..brother by the time she was 21...but that's..like her ex-husband now..but...she rushed into it like// because she..thought like that was the right thing to do cos that was then..like ya...it was sorta like the done thing..to get married and start having kids...but then she obviously realised after a few years that..it wasn't right so then..like they split up and stuff...but then my brother...and his girlfriend..I think her..my brother's girlfriend and um..her parents were

also like that...they had..my..youngest nephew when she was 18...they didn't mean to like it wasn't like planned but then after that they got engaged and everything..they've been..to..like with each other for..twelve years?...and got two other kids..so I think it depends on like your parents...//like your opinions like..cos like you said that..your Mum dint get married then you// said you..don't want to get married// [ind] and so/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
//No.

[u //Hmm.

Isabella  
/But I think my Mum's the reason why I'm// not that bothered because she's....ne...well she never really made it look as if she were that fussed..like I..//sometimes I'd ask her like "oh did you never want to get married and like...like// have a nice big wedding and like have it all planned out and things like that" and she's like "well no it never really bothered me that much..cos I did want to at one point" she went "but then I think I just got past the point of like...bothering really"//..so I think that's the reason why I'm...like as laid back about it as what I am..like I think if I...I think if I never got married..like I think I'd want to..but I don't think..I'd be like..in...in a cave like being like// completely upset and //depressed that I never got

married//...but some people probably would wn't they like.../

Anna  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[u //Hmm].

Fay  
/I think/.

Catherine  
/I think I'd be sad if my boyfriend never [laughs] asked to marry me I think..like...//yeah..like my Mum and Dad are not married...they've been together twenty-two years and my Mu..my Mum like hates anything like that and she's like "no you don't need to marry him" like..being with him we've got a mortgage sort of thing [laughs]// but like..I don't know what it is like I just think...I'd..like if we got like further and further down the line and we'd been together like..twenty years and he'd never asked me I'd be...I'd be a bit like...er..like "why don't he wanna ask me" sort of thing// like/.

Isabella



//Would ya?

Isabella  
[//Laughs].

[u //Yeah].

Fay  
/I'm really wary about it..especially at  
like..a young age because..my  
parents lived together from being  
fifteen...they were married by 21 and  
had two kids by 25...and then they  
got divorced by the time they were  
30 and I think...that was to do with  
them being so young and not having  
them life experiences that  
people//...necessarily have...so  
I'm..I'm really wary about..starting  
like..young/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u /Hmm//].

[u //Yeah].

Zoe – 00:40:00  
/I'm not..my Mum met..my Dad when  
she was like fifteen and they got  
married and dint split  
up...but...//..yeah//...yeah but I still  
believe in it all and still think it's all  
like/.

[u //Laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

Fay  
/I..I..do want to get...I do want to get  
married and have kids...//I just  
wouldn't..get married to  
someone...that I met now..if that  
makes sense...//or I can't see myself

getting married to someone that I  
met now/.

Zoe  
//Hmm.

[u //Hmm].

[u /Yeah//].

Catherine  
//Yeah/.

Anna  
/I can't see myself marrying my  
boyfriend/.

[mu /No/].

Isabella  
/But I said that my boyfr..not in a  
horrible way but I said..“I don't..I  
don't think that like...that I'd marry  
ya”/.

[mu /Laughs//]. – 00:40:20

Anna  
//Cos it..it depends on the  
relationship as well...like ours quite  
a..childish one not like..but// it's..it's  
not mature...yeah it's not like//...I'd  
go and like cook him like a meal and  
he'd come home and it'd be...//we're  
not like that//..it's just we're a  
teenage couple that..we just...//love  
each other but..we don't necessarily  
want to be with each other forever  
and ever...//but whe..his  
parents...they..met and like they got  
married like around this sort of age  
and they'd been together for..years  
and they're still like a teenage  
couple//...like when I go round there  
and b..like we're sat on one sofa and  
they're sat on the other..they  
act..more childish then we do//...but I

think it's quite nice cos it shows like  
how in love they are/.

Isabella  
//Not dead serious//.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

[u //Laughs].

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Laughs].

[u //Yeah//].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm//].

Isabella  
/That is cute/.

Anna  
/So it does depend on// like the  
person that you...I think you do  
know..if you are going to be with  
them..cos if you can actually...bear  
to be with them for like 40-odd  
years/.

[u //Hmm].

Fay  
/[laughs] Bear to be //with them/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Anna  
/Cos you think if/.

Isabella  
/I think a lot of people get bored/.

[mu /Yeah//].

Anna – 00:41:16  
//Yeah you have to think// in 40  
years am I gonna still..want to spend  
time with you are there things that  
irritate me now...//that will only get  
worse/.

[mu //Yeah].

[u //Laughs].

Isabella  
/See when I think of that I think I  
probably won't want to spend the  
next forty years  
with//...you//...[Laughing]..but that's  
just my opinion [laughing].

[mu //Laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
You said people get  
bored..and..more bored now// as...as  
opposed to..in the past..why do you  
think people get more bored?/

Isabella  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
/I don't..//I don't know whether  
people get more bored now..but I  
think people probably did in the past  
but...like it were frowned upon to get  
divorced..a bit ago weren't it like it  
wasn't th...like people get divorced

everyday now don't they?//..if they marry someone.

[u //I don't].

Anna

/Like if a relationship was falling apart like..grandparents would just fix it..cos that's/.

Isabella

/Or like put up with it won't //they?/

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Zoe

/My grandparents are divorced apart from my Mum's parents but my Dad's parents are split up and split up the new people he married and everyone...so I don't think//...necessarily.

Catherine

//I think these days like now like..if say you got together with your boyfriend like when you were young like..I started going out with my boyfriend when I were like 15//..so...like people are saying "oh don't you get bored" like..cos you've..just been with that same person for like so long...//people like expect you to like...go out and have your life experiences and like meet different people..before..you go..like into a serious relationship and..b..but in the past..like..that were like frowned upon it were like you only ever be with one person..you marry that person like straight away sort of thing//..so..it's a bit/.

[u //Hmm Mmm].

Fay

//I said that to you before.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Anna

/But it...it depends on what sort of experiences you want as well...// because if you're like happy with him and you don't want to necessarily..like..meet other people then what's the problem...//whereas some other people...they don't want to be tied down in a relationship and they//...//they want to meet other people not just..necessarily like say..this is the one person that I wanna be with right now...//cos..we're able to do that these days..like...it's not..obviously it's still frowned upon...but it's not as frowned upon for a woman to...experiment and like..sleep with however many people she wants// to cos it's...we're more...free now..in that/.

Catherine

//Yeah.

Catherine

//Yeah.

Catherine

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

/Yeah/.

Isabella  
/Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Is that a good thing..so does  
marriage...do you all feel marriage  
means the..same as it used to do?

Isabella  
No.

Zoe  
//No//.

Catherine  
//No//.

Fay  
/People got married for the sake of  
getting married a long time ago...and  
a lot of people got married because  
they were pregnant.//...whereas now  
it's..a lot of people get  
married..because they want to get  
married to each other/.

[u //Hmm].

Isabella  
/Oh I think it's opposite...I think a lot  
of people..m..are...a lot more  
people...erm...marry..probably marry  
into money now.

INTERVIEWER  
Hmm.

Catherine  
Well you hear more about like  
people just getting married and  
then..like especially celebrities get  
married and then like 72 hours later//  
they get divorced and stuff...//so I  
think sometimes it can be a bit  
meaningless/.

Isabella  
//Yeah they get married when they're  
drunk.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
/It is/.

Anna – 00:43:55  
/Like I think you need to show some  
sort of commitment to someone  
before//...getting married and...I..I'm  
so for gay marriage cos like..you see  
like..gay couples that have been  
together for years and years...why  
can't they..if they want to be..like  
connected in that way why can't  
they..but then a couple...that just get  
married for the sake of it and then  
divorce like..six months later/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
/Yeah and that's fine//.

Catherine  
//Hmm.

Anna  
/Yeah that's not fair so// I think it/.

Isabella  
//It's not.

INTERVIEWER  
/You're all for gay marriage then?

[mu Yeah].

Isabella  
Definitely.

Catherine

I don't see what it matters like if// you love that person why should you not be told..that like..you can't marry him/.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
/Well they can now can't they?  
[laughs].

[mu Laughs].

Catherine  
Oh yeah.

Isabella  
What were that on news though about that if they already had a civil partnership they had to wait?

INTERVIEWER  
Ohh I'm not sure.

Isabella  
Th..there were sommat on news that if..if they'd got a civil partnership//...that before they went for the full marriage thing they had to wait before people that..hadn't had a civil..I think it was sommat to do with that..//but that were really awful I thought...cos if..yo..if they wanted to get married..like there and then..then why wn't they be allowed to because everybody else is...//I don't think it matters if yo..if you're gay or straight whether you want to get married or not...I don't think it should matter.

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[mu //Yeah].

Anna  
I think gay people...tend to have stronger relationships like the// long-term ones//...cos...th..they just do..th..they...just stay together and they/.

[mu //Yeah].

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Zoe  
/I think it depends on the person as well though..cos my brother's gay and he's..no way will he ever be in a long-term relationship..he's not that sort of person he's just like/.

Anna  
/But you say that now..but in a few years if he meets like right person he might/.

Zoe  
/No he won't//...he's not going to settle down he doesn't want kids he doesn't want anything/.

[u //Laughs].

Fay  
/To be fair I thought that about my brother...and he's...settled down with his girlfriend now//...like the..they're really strong in a relationship where he used to be a proper little...manslut//..basically..[laughs]..b ut he's not anymore/.

Zoe  
//I can't see that happening.

[u //Laughs].

Anna

/My brother was like that and when they had like their first child...like they weren't...they were rocky and everything but then they stuck...to it and like now he's settled and he's like...a great dad and...like my Mum says I..I don't really understand it cos he was...a real troublemaker when he was like 15..16...and then now he's 30 he's grown up so much and he's now...settled and he's happy like//...he loves the life that he's got now/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Zoe

/I think kids do do that to you but I think if you're gay as well it's not as..you can't just..accidentally get pregnant can you like...//and you wouldn't want..well I dunno..it depends on whether you..you want one to be the dad and one not to be or whether you had to adopt and that's like a..conscious choice rather// than just a "oh I gotta go//..I got a kid"...so.

Isabella

//No.

[u //Hmm].

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER

So you can't just fall...pregnant anymore..does everyone else feel like that?

Zoe

Yeah..I think you can// if you're like a straight..like a woman and a man/.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Fay

/But you can just physically fall pregnant by accident is that what you mean?

Zoe

Yeah.

[mu Laughs].

Anna

Can actually go and see..hmm.

[u Hmm].

INTERVIEWER – 00:46:45

OK..so I noticed erm...cos you mentioned quite a bit about..a few of you mentioned the importance of life experience..what do you mean by...life experience you know before you..might settle down or?/

Anna

/I wanna go travelling//...cos I..I feel that if you do settle down...and you get like a..long-term job and like..an actual career...then it's harder for you to go travelling//...you don't get as much time off...as now as we have summers and stuff so we can..go travelling like..one of my best friends...she's travelling at the minute...but she's coming home cos I..something's happened like with her boyfriend and they've now split up...and I'm saying to her like.. "I'm so jealous that you've got this amazing opportunity and you're wasting it cos you and your boyfriend have split up"...//so I

think...I want to travel because I feel that if...I do end up settling down...I'm not gonna get that opportunity again...and I think...m...my cousin went on holiday..or went travelling with his girlfriend at the time...came back with a new girlfriend..i.e. he's gone for..like a year...he's now married to her..like because they shared something that they both love..like they went to countries and they..did things and..he proposed to her in Thailand where..I think it was..they like met or something...so I think travelling...is a really good experience because it shows you the world...and you can meet great people that you're friends with// throughout and you can meet people that you could end up..falling in love with and...marry and have kids with...so yeah...life's quite boring and mundane if you just...//spend it...all in the same city that you're born in and...I want to..see things//...I'm bored of Watford.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[mu Laughs].

Catherine – 00:48:25

I'm opposite..I'm quite homely like I don't..like I live in Leeds anyway..I din't move out..I stayed at home...and I don't know like..I'm just quite a homely person but...alright I..I wouldn't be bothered about travelling and such..d..I would like to go on holidays and stuff..but...for me like life experiences would just mean like having fun before..you know if I had a child now..like..it would ruin it cos..wouldn't be able to go out wouldn't be able to go on holiday..you can't be spontaneous..that's like//...sort of the life experiences I want to have just to be spontaneous and do..whatever I want to do.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
So we've got spontaneity is important..travelling is important..so you..feel like..do you all feel like that like if you did get settled down you'd be tied down is that.

Fay  
I want to be able to do what I want when I want...//at this age//but if I had a child I wouldn't be able to.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
//But if.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

[u //Hmm].

Isabella

I think tha..I think if you had a child you wn't be able to...but like in terms of being in a relation..in a relationship and doing what you want like..I've been with my boyfriend four years and I can still do//...what I want when I want//...I think it li..it depends on...like we've all been saying the individual people it just depends//...yeah..and I feel like there's nothing that I couldn't do like if..if I wanted to up and go to..go round world then he wouldn't tell me that I couldn't/.

[u //Hmm].

Catherine

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Hmm/].

Anna

/But if you had a child then it'd..that's/.

Isabella

/Yeah..yeah if I had a child then obviously I wouldn't be able to/.

Fay – 00:49:40

/That's what I'd look at as settling down//.

[u //Yeah/].

Isabella

/What having a child?/

Fay

/Having a child.

Catherine

/Yeah//.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Fay

Having a boyfriend is just having a boyfriend in't it?/

[u //Hmm/].

Isabella

/Yeah well getting married and having a child is like...settling down.

Anna

Yeah...because then everything changes cos you've got another life...depending on you//...whereas a boyfriend...is fully capable..mostly//...they can look after themselves...like sometimes they need a little bit of help...sometimes..but..a child..can't do anything..like you're the one that has to feed them clothe them and...look after them//...and then you're stuck with them for like..18 odd years//...before they can actually..go off...cos like obviously like go off to uni at that age..or if they want to//...//but yeah.

Isabella

//Yeah.

[u //Laughs/].

[mu //Yeah/].

[mu //Laughs/].

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Isabella

//Hmm.



INTERVIEWER

OK so I noticed erm..in our conversations you've..we've been using words like...'manslut' and// 'bitchiness' and I'm just wondering what do you feel about those kinds of words like 'slut'..'slag'//...'bitch'?

Fay

//I don't..I don't take them seriously to be fair/.

INTERVIEWER

/Hmm/.

Catherine

/You find them quite like funny..like//...if someone was to say like..even in a jokey way say like...oh..like if you were to say to your friend like "oh you're a slut" like..she wn't turn around and be like "oh..I hate you" she'd laugh// like/.

Fay

//Yeah.

Isabella

//Yeah.

Fay

/I would only use that word...as a joke to somebody I know...I wouldn't sit here and say t..about a girl that I'd heard something about that she's a slut...like I don't..I..it wouldn't bother me//..if someone said it about me...but/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Anna

/At my school there was a thing called 'Slut of the Week'//...it all started cos we had a thing like

where the boy school and girl school met up we had like a...party at this place..and this girl lost her virginity to a guy there..so someone put up a poster...S.O.T.W. so that the teachers wouldn't know...and put her name on it...and then..a few weeks later I had a guy come round my house...and then the next day...like..nothing happened but my name wen..went up on that board//...like Slut of the Week just cos I'd had this guy// from the year above/.

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Gasp].

Isabella

/Did they allow people to put it up in the school?

Anna

I took it down/.

[mu //Laughs].

Isabella

//Oh/.

Anna

/Cos it was just like..people thought it was funny but actually//..I found it quite offensive cos I was like//...you're calling me a slut you don't actually know anything about me...you're just assuming that...like all of these things have happened and/.

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Fay

/That's why I wouldn't find it offensive...//...cos they don't..they don't know anything about me and so// what are their opinions is their opinion it wouldn't bother me at all/.

Isabella – 00:51:52

//It depends in what context.

Isabella

//But then.

Anna

/Rumours went round that school...my boyfriend knows one of the boys from the boy school..cos like he..like..he's a year older and went to a different school...he's..both at our university..this boy told my boyfriend..."oh yeah Anna's 69ing Chris McGregor's in the park"..never happened..but because like..the..like..cos of this Slut of the Week thing rumours went round...and then...//they're still going on now...//like...I //walked past...//this guy...and him and his mates like someone called me a slut..when I walked past em..all cos of these rumours that went round my school//...so I think it's...it's not funny when other people say it..if your friends say it..like if my friend came up to me "oh god you're such a slut"...that doesn't bother me...//but when it's someone...who doesn't know you//...who then makes up...like random crap up about you//...then it's...it's out of order...like..cos that carried on that Slut of the Week thing..like there was this girl who..never kissed a boy before..got with a guy at the party she went up in the world...and it

destroyed her like she cried..and didn't recover for ages//...//cos it..it's..just..it's out of order because that's someone's life and if they wanna go out..and kiss someone or someone wants to go out and sleep with someone that's their choice..they shouldn't be mocked for it and...unless your friends are doing it cos they're doing it cos...they love you and you're// like "ah"/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Gasp].

Catherine

//Sounds like a nasty school.

[u //Gasps].

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

[mu //Aww].

[u //Laughs].

Fay

[Laughing] That's like a greeting with my friends/.

Anna

/Yeah/.

Fay

/Calling each other a slut [Laughing].

[mu Laughs].

Anna

But if a random girl says it...//then it's out of order//...and if a guy says it I find it so much worse when a guy says it...because if...a girl does something...that a guy would do..she's called a slut but he's like a player and a lad and like "oh yeah"// like/.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//So.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Fay – 00:53:30

/Everyone will love him for doing it.

Anna

//Yeah.

[mu //Yeah. Hmm].

Anna

If a guy slept with two girls in one day...he'd be a lad..all his mates would be all like "yeah yeah"..if a girl did that..she'd be..called a whore and/.

Catherine

/Everyone would say like she were disgusting// but..everyone would be like [laughs] hi-fiving the lad like// it's not really fair is it?

[u //Hmm].

[u //Laughs].

Zoe

//Yeah.

Isabella

No.

Anna

She'd be labelled as a whore.

Catherine

Yeah.

Anna

Forever...not saying that's happened like/.

[mu /Laughs].

Anna – 00:53:50

Not done that.

INTERVIEWER

So it seems there's one thing where it's..where you're joking with your friends like you called your brother..a..I think it was a manslut//...but then when it's someone you..calling you..someone you don't even know it's much more negative?

Fay

//A manslut [laughs].

Catherine – 00:54:05

Yeah/.

Fay

/Th..there's no point in calling someone you don't know names because you don't//...you don't know...//at all.

INTERVIEWER

//No.

[mu //No. //Hmm].

Isabella  
I wn't call someone that I didn't know  
a name...well I wn't to their face.

INTERVIEWER  
Hmm.

[mu Laughs].

Isabella  
I would...I wouldn't go..I wouldn't go  
up to somebody and say "aw you're  
a slut" like in a really nasty context/.

Fay  
/Or send rumours round about  
them...because// you wouldn't want  
that doing to yourself..so/.

Isabella  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
/Hmm/.

Isabella  
/I don't get how people can do it I'd  
be too scared that it would come  
back round on me//...I'd be like "ooh  
no".

Fay  
//Doing it to someone else//].

[u //Laughs/].

Anna – 00:54:40  
/You never actually know where it  
comes from//...one of my friends  
used to be...amazing at spreading  
crap that wasn't true...like you'd hear  
something from you but like "how the  
hell have you heard this  
like"...but..she'd make it up and  
she'd twist it...so sh..so she's sort of

a friend that's not a friend...cos  
she's..like that...so it's..not nice.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
So..why do you think people do  
this..calling each other these names  
and/?

Fay  
/Attention seeking probably.

[mu Hmm].

Fay  
Or jealousy//....jealousy.

[mu //Hmm].

Isabella  
Yeah.

Zoe  
Yeah.

Anna  
Jealousy definitely plays a big part in  
it.

Fay  
Definitely/.

Anna  
/Cos if..if something's supposedly  
happens with a guy that someone  
else likes...they'll spread a rumour  
about it...to make..that girl look  
bad...so that then that guy would be  
like.."oh...maybe she is like..a  
whore" and...//so that they can get  
them is..is..the competitive thing  
again.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

Isabella – 00:55:20

//I don't think people like to see other people having a good time.

Catherine

No.

Isabella

//Especially when they don't know what they're like//.

Anna

//Or when women and they're like having a really crap time/.

Isabella

/People just don't like to see other people doing well and having a good time...that's...that's what I think anyway/.

Catherine

/Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

Why is that...do you think?/

Anna

Because they're jealous.

[mu Yeah].

INTERVIEWER

And jealous again.

[mu Hmm].

INTERVIEWER

And you//...talk..talked earlier about the competitiveness as well and that...every man for himself or woman for herself/?

[u //Hmm].

[mu /Yeah].

[u Laughing].

INTERVIEWER

So you feel that's like..do you think there's a particular problem now or do you think it's always been like that...like..back// in history?

Fay

//Think it's more of a problem now.

INTERVIEWER

Hmm.

Catherine – 00:55:55

Like girls are a bit like say you went on a night out...like..in if you were..had lad friends or whatever..like sometimes..girls will just give you mucky looks and like...just for being out like..even if like "oh you got a lot of make-up on" or whatever a girl will just like give you a mucky look whereas I don't think before..like..I think girls were more united like//...yeah they're really judgemental and bitchy towards each other even if they don't know the person..just for no reason.

Fay

//Girls are more judgemental now.

Anna

If you were a bit different to that person then they'll...judge you because it's not...what they expect you to be like so everyone expects...well some girls expect you to be just like them//...like sort of girl that's gonna...go out like in a little black dress and put on..loads of make-up on and if someone's out

in...something that's a bit different..then she will be judged for it...like I know a girl that..was..at prom..who got judged for wearing like a tartan prom dress...just cos it's a bit different...but I thought it suited her personality...so well..and she looked so good//...but then other people were judging her because...that's not the norm...like it's..or them..or it's not what they expected her to be like//.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

So there's this norm that people expect girls to adhere to basi..to be?

[u Hmm].

Anna

To be like the ones that are like//...wear the pretty clothes and...make-up and do your hair and stuff...obviously..it's nice to put an effort in but if someone wants to...put a slightly different..different effort in they shouldn't be judged for it/.

INTERVIEWER

//Who are like.

[mu /Hmm/]. – 00:57:15

Catherine

/Yeah.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think it co..it's more a problem now than it used to be cos you said wome..girls used to be much more tighter then now..close together then now...they're stabbing each other in the back...so to speak?

Anna

Because we are more independent//...as women we do have...more freedom now...so we're not just like the submissive ones that...all dress the same that aren't just housewives and..stuff..we can be who we want to be...it's like we can be different.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

Hmm.

Isabella

I think it's because we have to compete now...//but I think it's...I think it's wit..it's with everyone..as well as between women like you have to compete for...like to get into university you have to compete..for a job you have to...you have to compete for..well you compete every day don't ya?

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

Hmm.

Isabella

Hmm.

INTERVIEWER

So do you all feel the competitiveness is...what is..driving this kind of behaviour?

Catherine

Yeah //I think like...if...if you're competitive with someone...even if you don't know that person if you were competing..I don't know say for like..a job..or sommat..you'd never say about that girl "oh yeah they were the better person" you'd be like..you'd say sommat..probably nasty about em just because it's like...that competitive...streak sort of thing it like brings out a bit of jealousy I think...that's what most people are like these days.

Zoe

//Probably.

Anna

I went for a job interview the other day...and the manager was with...the girl that was before me..they came downstairs and this..like the manager just like came over to me and stuff..this other girl gave me the bitchiest look//...just cos I was like another person going for the job...//I don't..I don't know if that was actually her face or not//..but it..it looked..some people can have a bitchy face...but it just..it..I was just like "Oh!...OK then"...//like if she gets the job...good for her...but you don't need to like...look down on people just cos...they're also..going for something that you want//...//so it's...it's quite funny though...cos I..I don't know if she was doing it to sorta like put me off or something but I just thought "OK...//my turn...carry on"/.

[u //Laughs].

[u Whispering]

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER – 00:59:15

/Do you think women who do things like that try and put you off...or...other tactics I guess?

Anna

I don't think they necessarily do it to put you off..like..consciously...but just think...I can't..I don't know what I'm trying to //say/.

[u //Laughs].

Fay

/Sometimes I mucky look people and I don't realise I'm doing it cos I need glasses and I'm just squinting//...it..it makes it look like// I'm..I'm turning my nose up at somebody but..but at// the time I don't realise that they're looking back at me and I don't realise I'm pulling that face//...so sometimes people do it by accident...and they could be the loveliest person you could ever talk to..//but they just happened to have pulled that face at the wrong time and you//...take it as that//.

[mu //Laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

[u Coughs/].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

[u //Yeah].

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Anna  
If you're just staring like  
absently...then it's a bit// different to  
like looking at someone..like looking  
them up and down and then...I hate  
that when someone looks you up  
and down...like...in..in that sort of  
way...you're just like "why"/?

[u //Laughs].

Isabella  
I've been told I look at people like  
that though but I don't know that I'm  
doing it.

Zoe  
I think sometimes if you're// just  
looking at someone's outfit or  
something you're not meaning  
to..but you just staring and then  
they're like...//...//so.. "I'm just looking  
at what you're wearing".

[u //Hmm].

[u //Hmm].

Isabella  
//Yeah.

Anna  
It's the facial expression that goes  
with it as well...sometimes can be a  
bit/.

Zoe

/Yeah but you don't know what your  
face is doing/.

Anna – 1:00:20  
/No but if it's like//...obvious//.

Isabella  
//I know I don't//.

Fay  
//That's wha..that's what I mean by  
the fact that I squint when  
I..//so..when I don't have my glasses  
on cos it looks like I'm going like that  
[laughing] at someone//...I'm like  
"who are you?"...but I'm not actually  
doing that// [laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

Isabella  
[laughs] You just can't see [laughs].

[mu Laughs].

[u Coughs].

Anna  
Suppose it's just cos I've been...in  
that sort of environment where girls  
do look you up and down and  
like...will judge you...so I think that's  
maybe why I'm more sort  
of..conscious//...and think..well..think  
like..oh it's bitchy/.

[u //Hmm].

INTERVIEWER  
/So cos of the all scho..girl school  
background?

Anna  
Yeah...it's a bit shit really...//some of  
it was great cos like..like you're with  
like all your best friends every  
day..but then other times it can be



horrible...and there's a lot of competitiveness between different ages...//like we had a rivalry between the lower sixth...and it was actually..not like a fight...but a girl...who..when we put Christmas decorations up like the lower sixth's teddy bear...was sellotaped to the upper-sixth side...so when a lower-sixth came to cut it down..one..one of the upper-sixth like rugby tackled her off the chairs...//and she got like cut by// a pair of scissors//...and/.

[mu //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

[u //Laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

Fay  
It sounds like something...off of.. *'Waterloo Road'* //or something.

Isabella  
//Something from *'Mean Girls'*.

[/mu Laughs].

Anna  
I wasn't there when it happened...//but you hear about it and you're like why..why can't people be just like..."oh just cut it down"..why did she have to like..attack her when she was trying to get...the toy back//...and then there's like a massive...our head teacher...made us all go...and have an assembly where she spoke to us and stuff/.

[u //Yeah].

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Catherine  
/Like *'Mean Girls'*.

[mu //Laughs].

Isabella  
//It is..like *'Mean Girls'*!//.

Anna  
//It was..that's what my school// was really like.

[mu //Laughs].

Anna  
I don't think all...all of the...all girl schools are like that..I think it// was just particularly mine.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Isabella  
I wish I'd've gone my school was never that exciting [laughing].

Fay  
Yeah mine...my..no actually to be fair girls did..fight quite a lot at my school//...more so than the boys.

Isabella  
//Girls..girls fight//...more..more at our college and/.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

Anna  
/Was it all verbal...like physical/.

Fay  
/Oh physical I mean like//...two girls...I remember two girls were fighting...and one of them was punching the other one the other one was pulling her hair...but then..the girl that was punching her got pulled off so her arms were like..tied so she decided to kick her in face instead...//but I saw more girl fights..like fist fights..at my school then I did..//boy fist fights..like I think throughout the entire five years I was there I saw like three boy fights and at least ten girls.

Isabella – 1:02:10  
//Both...a mixture.

Isabella  
Yeah definitely.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Isabella  
//Yeah..me too.

Isabella  
Yeah definitely.

Catherine  
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Why were they all fighting..and?

Fay  
I don't think// the girls that went to my school were [laughing] very nice// to be quite honest// [laughing] they..they were horrible...they were fighting over..boys...majority of the time// like..the boys are good...Jasmine and Mika..two of my friends...they used to hate each other and they

had...three..four..fights maybe over the same lad and now they're best friends...like it's really weird but..they were...the ones that everyone were like "oh my god they're at it again...they're fighting"// and everyone would just// stand and watch.

[u //Laughs].

[mu //Laughs].

Isabella  
//Like animals.

Isabella  
//Yeah!

Isabella – 1:03:00  
//[Laughing] Just used to be the norm//...like also there was...in a fight in the corridor and all the teachers used to rush out..but like//...for pupils it just became...the norm that like girls start ragging each other's hair out in middle of the corridor/.

Fay  
//Yeah!.

Fay  
//We'd just carry on eating our dinner.

INTERVIEWER  
/Hmm.

Anna  
Girls would just like...have verbal fights at mine...//they would never be like..punches thrown and stuff.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
I don't even think they used to talk at my school..I literally..think..that that..it'll have been from one person said..other person said..like hearsay round// school...one girl would have had the guts..to go up to the other one and just hit her and then it'd just start/.

[u //Hmm].

Anna  
/That would've been the same but without the hitting...//they'd just shout//...there was a girl who//...quite bitchy..and quite rude about...a lot of the other girls at school...who..saw...one of my best friends in Rubik...and one of my best friends is really good friend with this other girl's friend's ex... and this...right [ind] saying..Candice my friend..and then this girl called Lindsay...Lindsay's friend's...ex is good friends with Candice...and in this club...Lindsay just...started on Candice...because she's friends with the boy...and it's her friend's ex...and like because they liked each other or sommat..and she just...nothing provoked it..she literally turned round saw her...and just started..shouting abuse at her//...in the middle of the club/.

Fay  
//Yeah.

[u //Laughs].

[u //Yeah].

Fay  
//That still happens...//like from//..issues from high school...from

my high school still go on when we see each other out.

Catherine  
//Hmm.

Anna  
//It's like.

Anna  
It's madness like...grow up...get over it and just...//if it's not your business...don't get involved...like Lindsay had no right to start on Candice but she just chose to anyway...Jess the girl...had..like dint actually like have a problem with Candice being friends with the guy...but it was just cos...Lindsay's like "oh yeah I'm gonna stick up for my mate"...but...it's just..unnecessary...that's when girls..uniting isn't necessarily good//...starting on another girl.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm

[u //Laughs].

INTERVIEWER  
What about you two...did you see any..have you seen any violence among women?

Catherine – 1:05:00  
Yeah...my school were horrible like...they were..well it wern't like a rough school as such but like...people from rough areas sort of came so...like every dinner time...we'd go outside// and it'd be like...it'd start by..people saying stuff...and being like "oh so and so and whoever are like are gonna have a fight"...even if they'd not even said they were gonna have a

fight...and like...it were...lads that were encouraging em as well..they'd be like "oh yeah like go punch her" [laughs] sort of thing...and then it'd just like result in [clap] like a big fight...and...I think girls like..some of the girls think that they had to like prove themselves a little bit like...//some of them were...not like quiet but...just like...didn't have like tons of friends or sommat and if someone else said sommat to them they..they'd just like thought right "I'll just right go up and like...start a fight" so...we did have a lot of like..fights at our school.

[u //Coughs].

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER – 1:05:40  
So..to prove themselves what's tha..could you talk about that a bit more..what's does that/?

Catherine  
/Because they were really competitive like...it were...sounds right weird but they had like..the other little groups that people would get in high school...so they'd be..they were like the main group of girls who were like a big group...and then...there were sort of like...I don't know what they were..like refer to them as like...they were a bit like..they liked moshier music and that sort of thing like...and those girls would hate the other girls for no reason// like...so...they'd always be like "oh but they're like plastic" and other ones would be like "oh..they're...moshers" or whatever...and just because of that like they'd want to...prove that they

were better//...than the others// and start a fight.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
//There were like a hierarchy...//with cliques and things//...but you'd have the popular group that everybody loved...and then...you'd have the..groups lower down..that not so many people knew...that would hate...//the popular ones for being popular...but the other ones were like...well we don't talk to them they're...losers..that sort of thing.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Yeah.

Catherine  
//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
//Hmm.

Fay  
So I think it's just..I think all high schools are pretty much the same though..they all have those groups.

Catherine  
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER  
Like the geeks..and the moshers//...that you mentioned..and quiet ones/?

[mu //Yeah].

Anna

/I used..I used to quite like some of the popular ones cos some of them...that weren't like the bitchy ones were really nice...but they were just friends with the girls that thought...that they were better than everyone else...so it's..I think it's...not necessarily like the whole group it's like individuals in the group that's sort of//...just are then friends with other people so then they get grouped into that..so.

INTERVIEWER

//Yeah.

INTERVIEWER – 1:07:10

Did you...I notice you all mention '*Mean Girls*' a few times//...and '*Waterloo Road*'...it's quite interesting...that it gets mentioned a lot its/.

[u //Laughs].

Fay

/'*Mean Girls*' is like the prime example of what high school is like...//but I //think that's because of '*Mean Girls*'...//like my school was definitely like it..you had the girls that everyone..liked..all boys fancied...//and then you had the..groups lower down...then you had the ones that wanted to be friends with the popular ones and stuff.

Isabella

//Yeah.

Zoe

//Ours wasn't though.

INTERVIEWER

//Hmm.

Catherine

//Yeah.

Isabella

I think as you get older it wears off though...//like when you get to your final//...do you think?/

Fay

//Yeah.

Anna

//It got worse.

Fay

/I think now all our groups like...that I had have all like disintegrated.